THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

# CAMEO

DECEMBER
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*FEATURING TWO COMPLETE NOVELS*

## THE ENCHANTMENT OF MERROWPORTH

HOW LONG COULD CORINNE RESIST HIS DEADLY CHARM? AND HIS OUTRAGEOUS DEMANDS?

## LUCY GREY

TRAPPED BY THE NEED OF HER ARISTOCRATIC PROTECTOR, WILL LUCY'S FEELINGS OF DREAD AND CONFLICT END IN LOVE?

*PLUS SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES INCLUDING*

## A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS

*AND*

## UNDER THE MISTLETOE

*FICTION BY:*
**GRETA NELSON**
**EVA IBBOTSON**
**JANIS COLES**

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# CAMEO

THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

December 1980

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## *A Letter from the Editor*

Dear Reader,

On Donner, on Blitzen! The holiday season has begun, a time of joy, giving and Santa Claus. Do you know, by the way, how the name Santa Claus came into being? Early Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam introduced Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children, to America but the name fast changed to Sant Nicolaus, then to Sinter Klaas and eventually into Santa Claus.

It was Prince Albert's homesickness for the Saint Nicholas he knew (who, in Germany, arrives on December 6th rather than Christmas Eve) that caused Victoria to celebrate their first Christmas together at Windsor in the German manner rather than adhering to the stern Puritan ban, then in force, on any kind of celebration. In what was a loving gesture to her husband, England's Queen Victoria was responsible for bringing to England and consequently to America the celebration of Christmas as we know it today. (See A Victorian Christmas, page 9)

A truly tragic love story is responsible for the custom of kissing under the mistletoe—this is the story of Siguna and her eternal love for Loki, the God of Mischief. The next time you catch a kiss under the mistletoe, remember Siguna and her devotion to the rambunctious Loki. (See Under the Mistletoe, page 92)

We have love and loving to thank for many of the traditions we carry on today in our celebration of the Christmas Holidays and love, after all, is the spirit of Christmas. CAMEO, the magazine of romance, wishes you a

Very Merry Christmas,

Manon Tingue

Manon Tingue
Editor

*Cover Illustration by*
*Franco Accornero*

Corinne Nelson and Ashley Jay in a winter wonderland at his family estate. From the novel . . . *The Enchantment of Merrowporth.*

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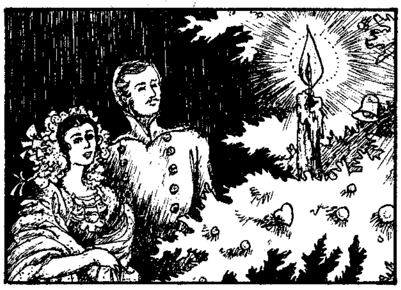

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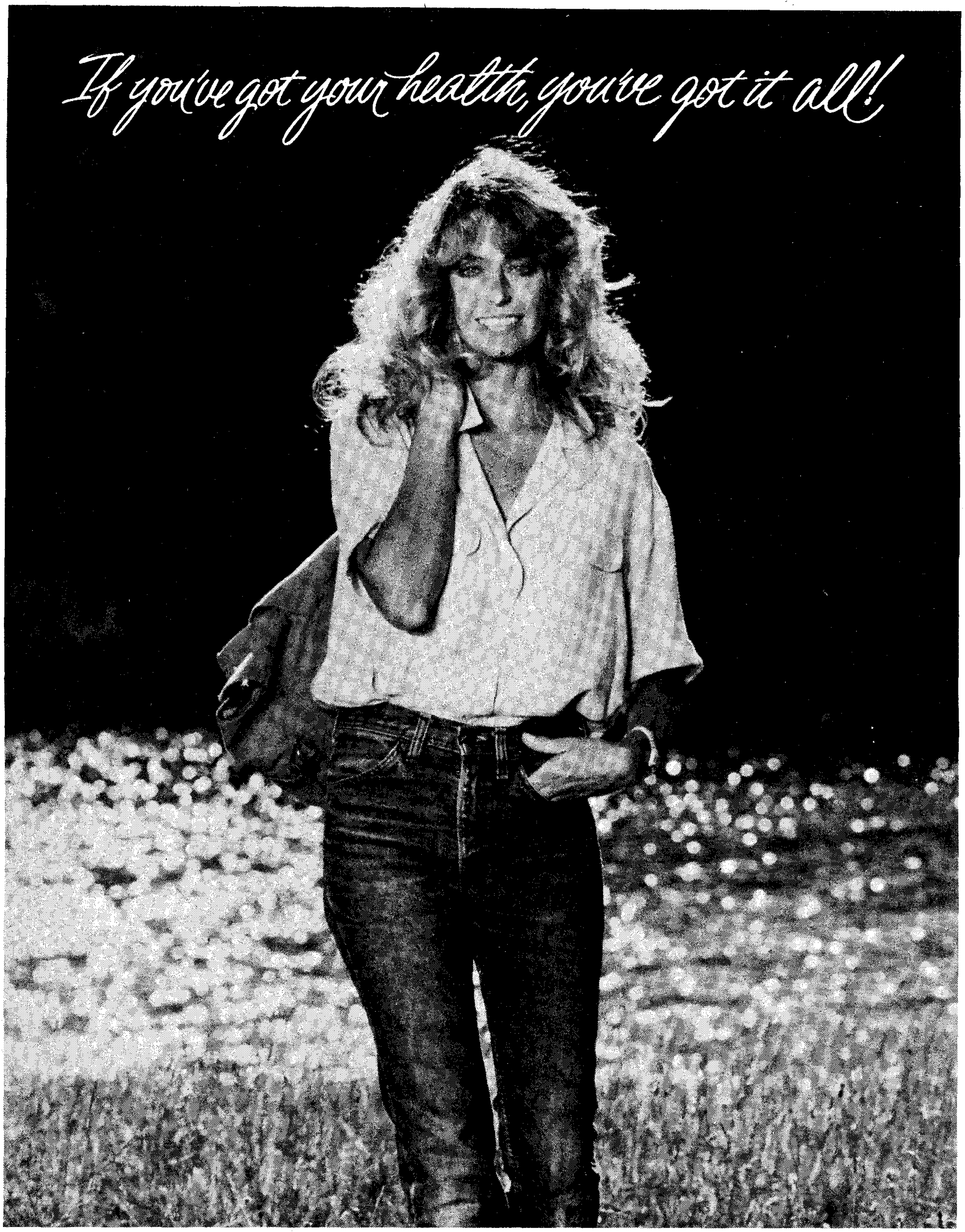
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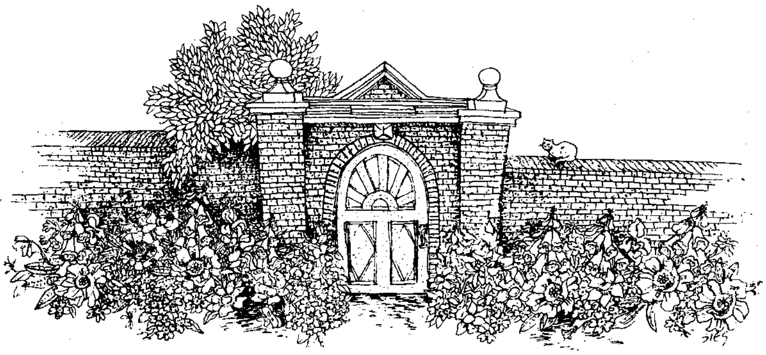
# Beyond the Garden Wall



*He would savor the wild passion spent that summer night for the rest of his life*

The girl in jeans and a faded blue T-shirt looked down at the overgrown grave, its low headstone smothered in a tangle of wild rose briars. She turned to the boy at her side.

"That's it—where the minister said we'd find it," she murmured softly," and it still looks the way great-grandfather Walter described it." She paused a moment before going on.

"I told you before. He was fresh out of jail when he emigrated in 1895. He told me that ages ago and about how it was.But it wasn't until just a little before hedied that he told me the story of this girl and what had happened to them. Her name was Rose... "

Walter had just stowed the last handful of mushrooms inside his cap when he saw her. She was carrying a basket of wet linen, sleeves rolled up on her dimpled arms, and soft tendrils of dark hair, escaping from her starched maid's cap, curled damply about her brow. The long blue gingham dress she wore swished through the dew-silvered grass of Squire's park, and he could hear the little cough that troubled her in the misty September morning.

His heart was thumping so loudly he thought she would hear it. He stood very still, under the thinning gold of the beeches, not wanting to scare her away. All through the dream-slow summer he had watched her: shyly, hopelessly, in love. After all, she was kitchen maid up at the Hall, while he, Walter Peggs, was the local bad boy, poaching for a living, because no one would employ such a scapegrace.

The white barred gate, separating park and woodland, rose between them. He moved slyly, to lean on it, looking down at her, and her gold-brown eyes widened in alarm.

"Morning," Walter said. "Like some mushrooms? Fresh picked, they are—big 'uns, too, go nice with a bit o' bacon."

He held out his cap between the bars, aware of the wild rose mouth above the creamy whiteness of her small, firm chin. She backed off hastily, like a startled pony.

"You stole 'em!" she said accusingly, but her eyes laughed at him. Suddenly bold, Walter vaulted the gate, catching her so that she was forced to drop the washing basket.

"Let me kiss you," he said thickly. "Please, Rose—just one, you're so pretty."

"In the broad daylight—oh, how could 'ee!" She was beating at him with tiny fists, her brown eyes scared and elated all at once. She smelled clean and fresh like the morning, and he snatched the kiss before she could stop him. With a little gasping cough, she pushed him

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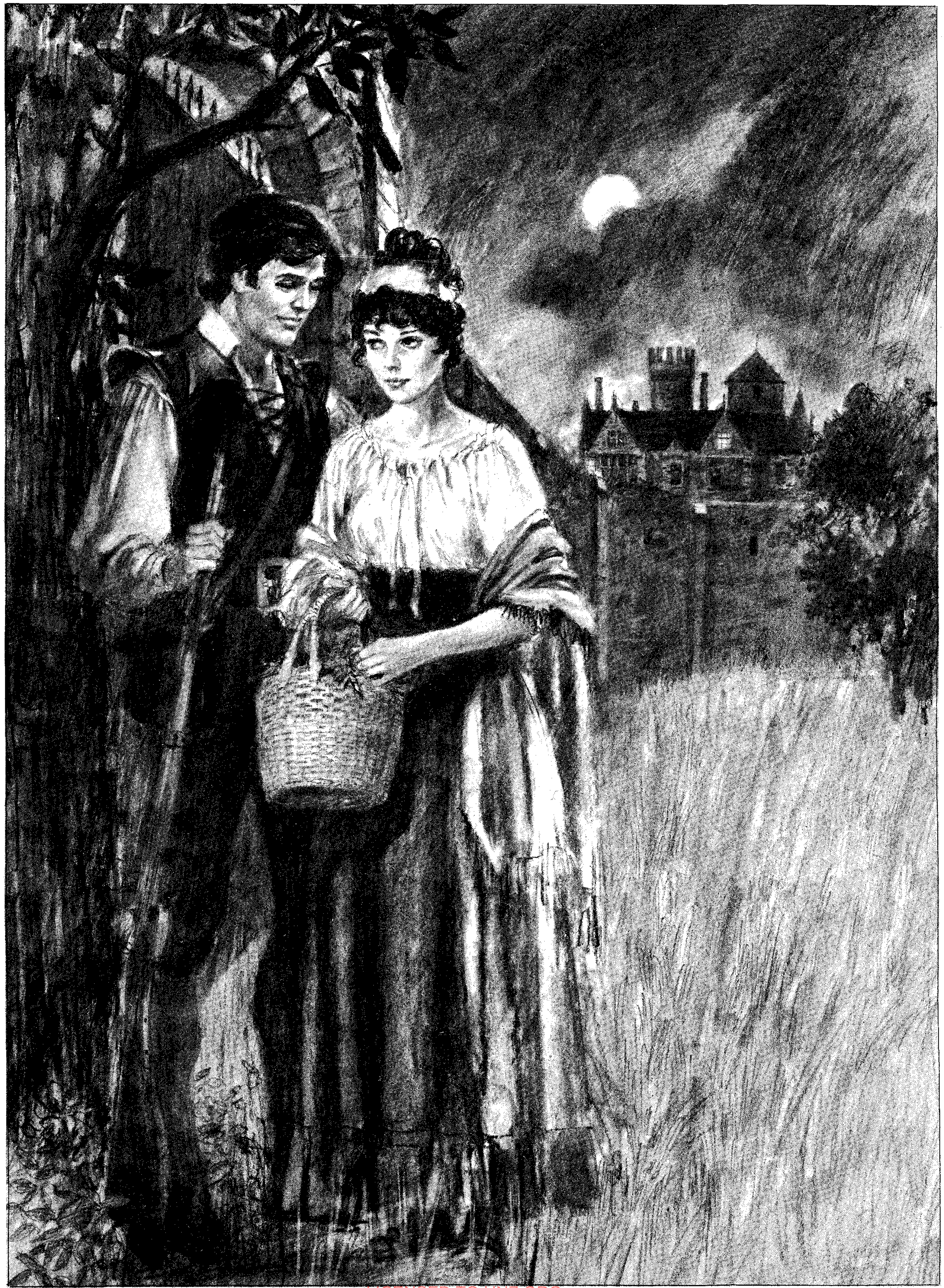
A short story by Beryl Shill



Illustrated by Jim Woodend

away; then she turned and ran like a frightened hare. Walter was left with the washing basket at his feet, but he knew better than to run after her. She would creep back as soon as he had gone. All the same, he *had* kissed her, and he was already dreaming of a hundred ways he would catch her again. Tenderly, he placed the mushrooms on top of the basket, not caring that his widowed mother would grumble when he returned empty-handed.

It was unfortunate for his plans that the mellow September weather changed overnight. October stormed in with cold and heavy rain. Game hid in coverts and rabbits kept their burrows, while all he got for his nightly rounds was a feverish chill. As autumn slowly colored the wet hedgerows, he stood shivering under their diminishing cover, thinking of Rose, hoping in vain for a glimpse of her. His mother had small patience with him.

"Settin' your cap at a silly bit of a girl," she sneered. "Great useless lad like you. Come to a bad end, you will, with your wicked ways."

"Thee'd get no Sunday dinners if I didn't get a bird or so," he said, grinning. "Any road, I'll have Rose walking out with me afore Christmas—you'll see."

"She'll make a hard bed for herself, then, if she's fool enough to have you!" his mother said. But she flicked his thatch of fair hair with her rough, reddened fingers, and her eyes were kind.

As soon as November brought the crisp dry weather he liked, Walter resumed his nightly forays in Squire's woods. Many an unwary roosting bird fell to his cunning, and many a narrow escape brought him within a breath of capture. Something in him gloried in the risk, and often inspired his most successful ventures, under the very nose of authority.

On such a night, after he had lain in wait for a hare, a cock pheasant flew up in front of him. With a swift, perfectly timed blow, he killed it, and was stuffing it into his jacket when the gamekeeper's dog burst through the hedge. Walter made for the wall on the other side of the lane, climbing it with the dog's fangs at his trouser legs, and found himself falling headlong into the Hall garden—of all places to seek escape!

Long practice had made his sight nearly as keen by night as by day, and he ran for the kitchen gardens, his scurrying feet blundering among cabbages and cold frames. He was making for cover in the laundry, a brick shed where the maids did the week's wash on Mondays—and hope flared as he noted a faint gleam of light at the window.

It was Rose, a shawl over her maid's dress, folding linen by candlelight. He heard her slight, persistent cough as he dived past her.

"Keeper's after me—where can I hide?" he gasped, and, quick as thought, she pushed him down into a pile of dirty sheets. Then she was outside, her candle flickering wildly in the cold air, locking the door behind her. For one awful moment Walter thought she meant to give him away, but as the pursuer clattered up, he heard her saying calmly how somebody'd shot past her, frightened her half to death, as they made for the shrubberies!

An eternity later she released him. The kiss he gave her warmed her chilled lips like summer wine. With his arms around her shivering body, he knew they would soon be walking out on Sundays . . . and he wouldn't let her go until she had promised to see him again. He thought that he would cut himself an ash sapling and oil it till it shone like best cane, and he would demand a clean shirt every weekend from his disapproving mother.

It snowed for their first meeting, but Rose looked enchanting in her Sunday-best coat of thin blue wool, her small nose pink-tipped with the cold. She permitted him one decorous goodnight kiss that left him hungry for more.

Week by week, he wooed her, all through winter into spring, until at last there came a night when he held her closer, longer, stifling her small cough with warm kisses. Wild roses scented the air of the hedgerow where they lay, and he murmured her name over and over again, until she pushed him away and began to cry.

"Rose, don't cry so—please, Rose, I love 'ee," he whispered. "I never meant to frighten you—we'll go along now, and you won't be late."

It was past nine o'clock when they reached the Hall, and Squire's lady was waiting for Rose at the maids' entrance.

"You are late, Rose," she said coldly. "Go in at once."

"'Twas my fault, ma'am," Walter said quickly. "We're walking out regular now, and I kept her out against her will."

"Walter Peggs, isn't it? No wonder she's getting into bad ways," Squire's lady peered at him, frowning. "I shall put a stop to it here and now—I won't have a good kitchen maid ruined by a good-for-nothing like you. Rose will be sent back to the workhouse if she persists in such conduct."

With that, she hustled the small, shrinking figure indoors. He had a final glimpse of Rose's flowerlike face looking woefully back at him over her shoulder, as the door shut firmly behind her. The bolt was shot with a sound of angry finality.

For days afterward, Walter haunted the Hall garden, unwilling to accept defeat, hoping for a moment's sight of her, but doors and windows remained fast shut. On Sunday, he spruced himself up and hung about the maids' entrance for most of the day, in hopeless misery. A harsh voice from an upper window threatened him with trouble unless he left the Squire's grounds.

From despair, his mood hardened to bitterness and anger. All through that hard winter he poached as he had never done before, despoiling Squire's coverts ruthlessly. The devil's luck was with him, it seemed, until a night in January, when the gloating keeper surprised him with a brace of pheasants strung carelessly round his neck.

## THE LOVERS

*by Helen Bjorklund*

*How absolutely*
*still it is*
*but for the crackle*
*of the fire*
*but for the liquid*
*amber poured*
*but for the kindling*
*of desire.*

*How eloquent*
*the silence is*
*at the mere touch*
*of fingertips*
*and what undying*
*vows exchanged*
*with just a parting*
*of the lips.*

*They sit apart*
*among the guests*
*on their own island*
*in a sea*
*of eyes discreetly*
*bent upon*
*the sacred ritual*
*of tea.*

*Apparently*
*oblivious*
*that love is so*
*conspicuous.*

Prison was a blistering experience, where he fretted continually over the savage loss of his love, and worried as to how his mother would fare on parish relief. By the time he had served his sentence, summer would be over and gone, and perhaps another lad would be making up to Rose. He'd black his eyes for him, as soon as he got out. But in his depths, he did not believe she would have forgotten him, her first love.

Long after, the story of those grim months was revealed to him by his mother. A hard woman, product of a harder life, she judged accordingly, and many an evening she crouched over her frugal fire, brooding on the reckless, feckless son she had reared. One night, a young girl in a dark cloak holding a wicker basket stood on her doorstep. Mrs. Peggs had eyed her grimly.

"Well, what do you want?"

"For you," the girl said, pushing the basket into Mrs. Peggs's arms. "Cook says I can bring you my supper every Sunday night," she added quietly, "and there's some wood out there in a sack—only it got heavy-like, so I left it outside the gate."

"You'd best come indoors," Mrs. Peggs said grudgingly. She'd flicked at a chair with her apron, as a gesture, before the girl sat down.

"You're that maid up the Hall," she said accusingly. "Pity you got mixed up with that lad o' mine—he's no good to you, my girl."

The girl said nothing, watching her as she unpacked the basket. Inside, beneath a spotless linen cloth, were eggs nestled in a wad of hay, a piece of boiled bacon and a basin of thickly jellied dripping. Mrs. Peggs's mouth watered, but she did not want to let her visitor see how it affected her, so she put it away in the pantry with an air of mere acceptance. With care, anyway, it would last the week. She turned an experienced gaze on the girl.

"You're expecting," she said. Her heart was thumping with the shock of her discovery. Rose pulled the concealing cloak more closely about her. She lifted a pale, composed face to the grim one of her hostess and smiled, as if she were happy at some inner secret.

"April," she said. "Don't tell Walter—'twas Missus parted us, he's not to blame. She'll turn me out when it comes as I can't work. . ."

"My, you've made a hard bed for yourself," Mrs. Peggs said. She made a sudden decision. "If she do turn you out, I suppose you'll have to come here," she added. "After all, 'tis Walter's. . ."

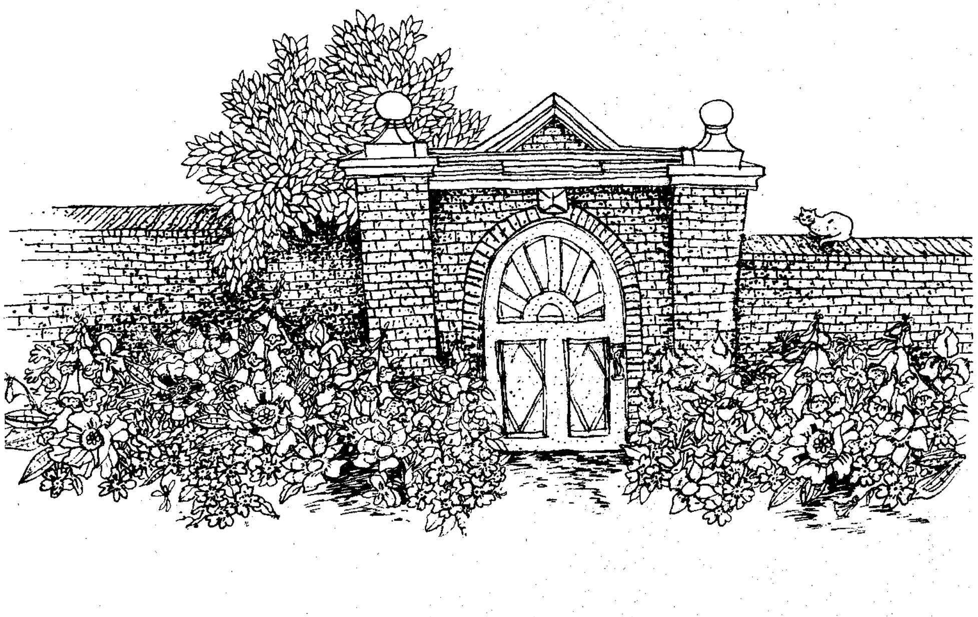
But when he came out of prison, his mother received him with a show of indifference.

"You be on your road to the hangman," she told him, "but that slip of a girl must think gold of you. I'd have starved but for her slipping me what she could from the Hall. You'd best go up there—I hear she's ailing bad."

"Ill—my Rose?" He waited to hear no more. In his mood, not even Squire's lady could keep the ragged Romeo from his young Juliet.

She lay, fever-flushed, on a bed in her attic room. He heard her cough as he burst in at the door. In a moment he had her in his arms, speechless with love and longing.

"If she hadn't been so ill," Squire's lady said, standing over him, "I'd have sent her back to the Union before the child was born. But the doctor wouldn't have her moved—he said she'd never been strong enough for a kitchenmaid, so I had to let her stay here. Next time, I'll pick a big strong farm girl and keep her under my thumb. I've been too lenient with Rose, letting her keep the child and go on working for me as usual, and after she deceived me so, hiding her condition for so long."



"A child—Rose had my child?" His voice was so hoarse, he hardly recognized it.

Squire's lady drew herself up, "Yes, six months ago," she said. "It's with a wet nurse now that she's ill, but it'll have to go into the Union now—I have no intention of being responsible for your—your bastard son. Now, be quick, she must rest."

But Rose opened her sad clear eyes and looked at him. He held the thin white fingers in his, and he did not let them go again, until they lay chill and lifeless in his grasp.

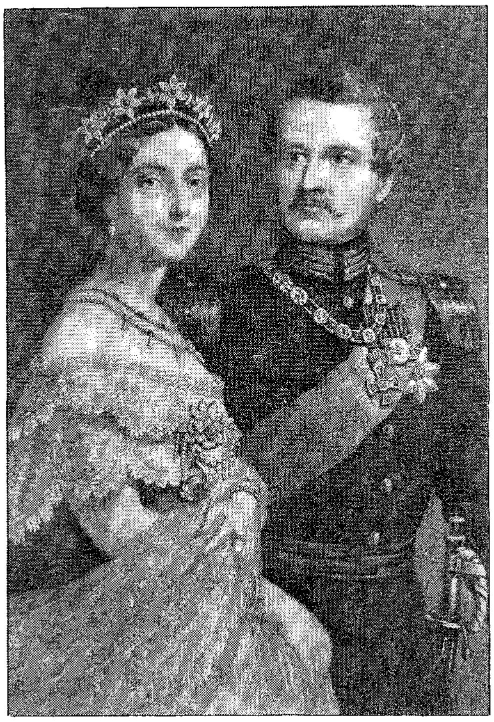
As the girl finished her story, she pushed a handful of the wild briars back from the grave and uncovered the rugged headstone. A weathered inscription revealed the word ROSE, and nothing more.

The boy's eyes were shining. For a moment he could only look at the girl. Then he said, "I'm sorry it happened to them but it could never happen to us."

The girl nodded. "But, you see, not long after Rose died, he emigrated to Canada with his old mother—and a young baby. The boy grew up, but he was killed at Vimy Ridge in the First World War, and he left behind a wife and son—my Pop, bless him. Great-grandfather never married, he just looked after them both. When I was small, he used to tell me about his poaching days—he was as tough as they come, but he was homesick for England. Then when he told me about Rose I wanted to see where it happened, and I made up my mind that one day I'd come and see it for myself." She glanced at him shyly. "I never dreamed it would be on my honeymoon."

"Rose," the boy said, "you were named after her, darling. It's beginning to get cold—shall we go back to the car?"

"Sure," she said, shivering in the evening chill of an October day, glad of his comforting presence. She turned for a last look at the sunken stone, hidden for all time now, in a smother of yellowing briars. But, just for a moment, the air was filled with the scent of wild roses, warm and sweet as a summer day. . . .



# A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS

## *A Gift of Love*

*"Merry Christmas, my beloved Albert," Victoria said, unveiling the stunning surprise she had so carefully planned.*

Victoria stood at the top of Windsor Castle's sweeping staircase waiting to receive the German princes. Her prime minister, Lord Melbourne, stood at her side and whispered in her ear.

"Surely you will give them your consideration, Your Majesty. You know as well as I do that you must marry and give England an heir to the throne. Even more importantly, you must have a protector." Melbourne hated to bring up the subject again, but Victoria seemed steadfastly to ignore the issue of marriage. Half the royal princes of Europe were vying for her hand, and yet Victoria was not moved.

"I shall never marry," she answered Melbourne, smiling sweetly. "And as for my German cousins, Duke Ernest and Prince Albert . . . You know, my lord, they are so unpopular that my British subjects have been stoning the palace ever since the princes' arrival."

"Nothing compared to what the Duke of Cumberland has been doing," Melbourne reminded her. "He will stop at nothing to become king."

Victoria laughed. "I know what my royal uncle has been up to: food poisoning, 'accidents' I have when I am out riding and sailing. Never mind," she said, gesturing to the crowd at the foot of the stairway, "I am surrounded by my devoted servants and—"

"What is it?" Lord Melbourne asked her anxiously. "What is the matter?"

"Who . . . who is he?" she stammered.

"Your 'unpopular German cousin,' Prince Albert," Melbourne stated, and watched Victoria's eyes dance with enthusiasm.

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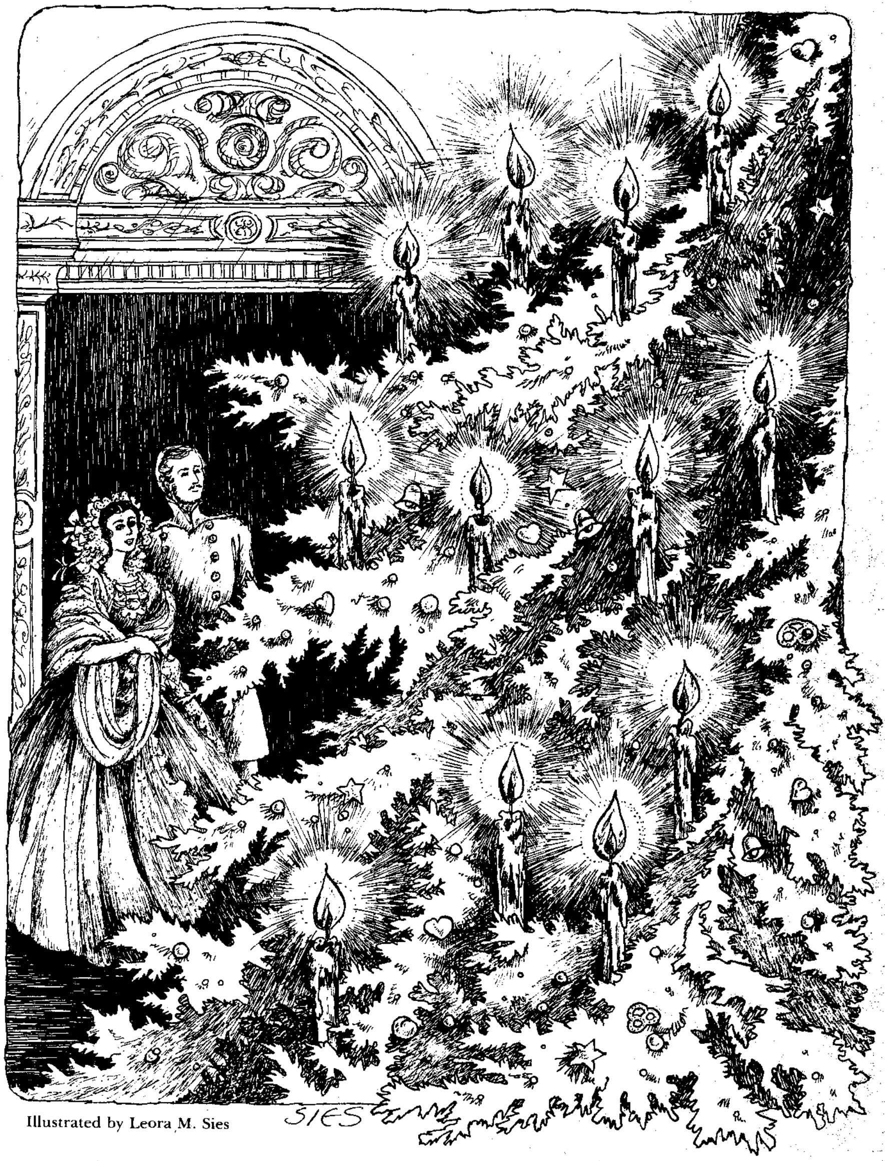
By Lee Motta



Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

"Albert . . . is . . . beautiful," she gasped, staring deeply into the young prince's eyes.

Albert knelt and kissed the queen's hand. "Your Highness."

Victoria made a gesture for him to arise, and stared intently at him. Oh! But he was handsome—the handsomest in all of Europe! And tall! And he had a perfect physique with wide shoulders tapering to a slim waist. When he forgot about his German stiffness and allowed a sparkle to strike his blue eyes, he could charm the world, and he did.

Albert tried to ignore the pounding of his heart. When his eyes met Victoria's, it was as though a searing rope of flame had gone through him, forever binding his heart to hers. Nor could he take his gaze away from her huge blue eyes. She was absolutely adorable.

Duke Ernest chided his brother, Prince Albert. "I see the stubborn, obstinate, willful queen has had quite an effect on you. Or don't you remember that was the way you described her before you met her?"

"Also spoiled," Albert said, ignoring his brother's sarcasm.

"Oh? Funny, you looked as though you had both been struck by lightning—"

"The queen is charming," Albert said, trying to hide his flushed embarrassment. "But a marriage between us would be out of the question. She is the Sovereign of England—the richest woman in the world. What have I to offer her?"

"You are clever, handsome, and a scholar. And you would cherish her for life, which is what she wants. Money and power she has—devotion is what she needs now. So? What could it matter that you are penniless? Someday I will inherit the throne of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, but by then, you will be the Queen of England's husband."

"I could never marry Victoria," Albert sighed wistfully. "I could never ask for her hand in marriage."

Ernest grinned. "You won't have to. Not if she wants you."

By the end of the week, Albert had been summoned for a private audience with the queen.

"Your Majesty," Albert replied to her proposal, "I am honored, but I must inform you that I am penniless, and I shall inherit nothing. I can offer you no land and no riches."

"Albert, I know what you cannot offer me. Do not tell me what you *cannot* offer me. Tell me instead what you *can* offer me."

"Marriage to you would be beyond my wildest expectation. I offer you my undying devotion, my absolute dedication."

"Perhaps I have been too hasty," Victoria began. "If you cannot offer me love, I must reconsider. I will only marry a man who loves me and loves my country."

Standing stiffly in his German manner, his face white, Albert answered her. "I am a German. My upbringing has not taught me to express my feelings of love easily."

Victoria looked at him closely. "Perhaps it is I who is the unworthy one. If you marry me you would have to give up your homeland and your family, and that is a very difficult thing to do. But if you marry me, I will strive to make your sacrifice as easy as possible."

Victoria confided her fears in her closest confidante, the Baroness Lehzen.

"He has never said he loved me," the little queen said wistfully.

"Of course he is not marrying you for love," Baroness Lehzen answered, seizing the opportunity. "Albert has no prospects. Naturally he desires to marry the wealthiest and most powerful woman in Europe. Listen to me! I have seen you grow from a mere baby into the Queen of England. I know what Prince Albert wants, and I know you should not marry him!"

Victoria studied her companion and saw the fear in the baroness's eyes. Victoria was everything to her and she would do anything to keep an influence over the queen. But Lehzen was stunned at Victoria's reply. "It does not matter. I love him enough for both of us, and some day I know he will love me as much as I love him."

The baroness's worst fears were realized. On February 10,1840, Queen Victoria married Prince Albert in one of the most celebrated weddings in history.

At first, the British populace was slow to accept the German prince. But when it was announced that Victoria was pregnant with an heir to the throne, all of England cheered the royal couple. Not long after the news of Victoria's pregnancy, Albert became a real hero to the people for saving the queen's life. While riding in their open phaeton, an assassin fired two shots at the queen using the Duke of Cumberland's pistols. Albert flung himself in front of Victoria and wrenched her down from the seat, shielding her body with his own. Again the people cheered, and called Albert a hero for saving their queen's life and for saving the life of the heir to the throne.

With Victoria's pregnancy came a greater need for Albert's support, both emotionally and politically, and the prince began to assume greater duties of state. Indeed, it seemed to the queen that Albert was a natural deputy.

But it had taken Victoria too long to realize her prince's talent. Before her pregnancy she had refused to let Albert take part in government affairs, and he had been hurt by her refusal. Now Victoria wanted desperately to atone for her earlier treatment of her husband.

"Your love and gentleness is beyond everything," Victoria murmured to Albert as they walked down a dreary corridor on Christmas Eve. "I have all my heart's desires: a perfect husband, a beautiful baby daughter, and a strong and prosperous country."

Her eyes sparkled as she reached for his arm. "But what is troubling you? Are you not happy here?"

"You are lovely tonight," he said. "I am gloriously happy with you and yet . . . I would like to celebrate, to be merry and festive as we are in Germany."

"Ah," she said. "Saint Nicholas?"

"And the decorations, the fir tree, the presents and sweets. Yes, it is all a chance to celebrate our good fortune, to sing and revel in our happiness. Stiff as we might be in Germany, we love to have the chance to celebrate."

"Perhaps," Victoria began, dropping her eyes from his face, "perhaps Saint Nicholas has not forgotten you here in dreary England."

"My love, you are here, and I am not forgotten. It is just a custom I am used to, and have looked forward to ever since I was a small child." Albert chuckled softly. "How I looked forward to Saint Nicholas's visit! I couldn't keep still so I would whistle and sing carols to keep busy." Albert began to sing to Victoria, as they walked arm in arm down the long palace hall.

"Teach me!" Victoria implored him. "Teach me one of your songs!"

Gently Albert sang the song again, slowly going over every word and phrase.

"It's lovely! Let's sing it again, but first, let's go sit down by the fire." Victoria took Albert's arm and led him through the huge drawing room doors.

Suddenly a little bell rang, just as it rang every Christmas for Albert in Germany

The room was ablaze with the lights of a hundred candles—on the mantel, on the tables, and on every branch of the fir tree in the middle of the room.

Albert gazed, entranced. Hundreds of green fir and spruce boughs were gaily tied with deep red velvet ribbons. The fir tree was lit by tiny candles and hung with marzipan and candied fruit. Small tables were set up: one for Albert, one for Victoria, and one for the tiny baby, Princess Royal. Each table was laden with gifts, and dishes of apples and nuts, raisins and cookies, and honey and spice cakes. A yule log was blazing in the fireplace.

Outside snow was falling softly, and carolers were standing under the windows as if serenading the queen and her prince.

Victoria let go of his arm and proudly gestured to the decorations around the room. "For you, my love, because you have brought so much light into my life."

"Victoria, Victoria. What a wonderful surprise! But what a secret! You are lovely!"

"Tomorrow, wait until tomorrow!" she exclaimed. "Tomorrow, we shall have such a feast! Better than anything you've had in Germany." Her eyes twinkled. "Roast goose stuffed with tart apples, and sizzling ham, a flaming plum pudding, and mince pies. Fruit cake, and . . ." She paused. "No, my beloved, we are just beginning to celebrate our Christmas."

"Was any man ever so blessed as to have a wife like you?" With his loving eyes upon her, Albert raised his cup of punch to toast her. "To my beautiful Victoria and to Christmas! May we celebrate many more together and as happily!"

"You have made this year the most wonderful one of my life." Victoria's eyes glistened as she looked up at him. "I wanted our first Christmas to be a perfect occasion, for you know how much I love you, dearest Albert. You have made yourself indispensible to me and to the country. This Christmas celebration is only a small token of my appreciation and love for you."

"You have made me the happiest man on earth, my beloved. From this day forth I will never again think of myself as a German, but as an Englishman who is madly in love with his queen." And when Albert took Victoria into his arms, she knew without a doubt that he did indeed truly love her with all his heart.

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*Editor's Note*

*The Christmas tradition Victoria started that night continued to grow each year at Windsor. On their second Christmas the royal couple were joined not only by their baby daughter, but by a little son born to them in November.*

*Over the years, Victoria bore Albert nine children, and Christmas became a gay, wonderful time at Windsor. Soon, the entire country began to celebrate the holiday as joyfully as their queen. Christmas trees were displayed everywhere, and carolers sang. Even Charles Dickens, in love and captivated by the queen's new festivity, celebrated the season by writing his famous tale,* A Christmas Carol, *in 1843.*

*Prince Albert died when Victoria was forty-two and in the twenty-fourth year of her reign. She mourned him for the rest of her life, robing herself in gowns and hats of dreary black. That is how we tend to remember her, as the dowdy old widow, not as the lovely young bride who celebrated her first Christmas so gaily with Albert at Windsor.*

*Even during her deepest periods of mourning, Queen Victoria never failed to celebrate Christmas and keep alive her memories of Albert. Surrounded by her children and grandchildren who had gone on to rule the world, Queen Victoria became the symbol for her era and the Victorian Christmas which we continue to celebrate to this day in a very similar manner to that of the young Victoria and Albert during that first year of their marriage.*

Illustrated by Jim Woodend

# A Rose In Amazonia

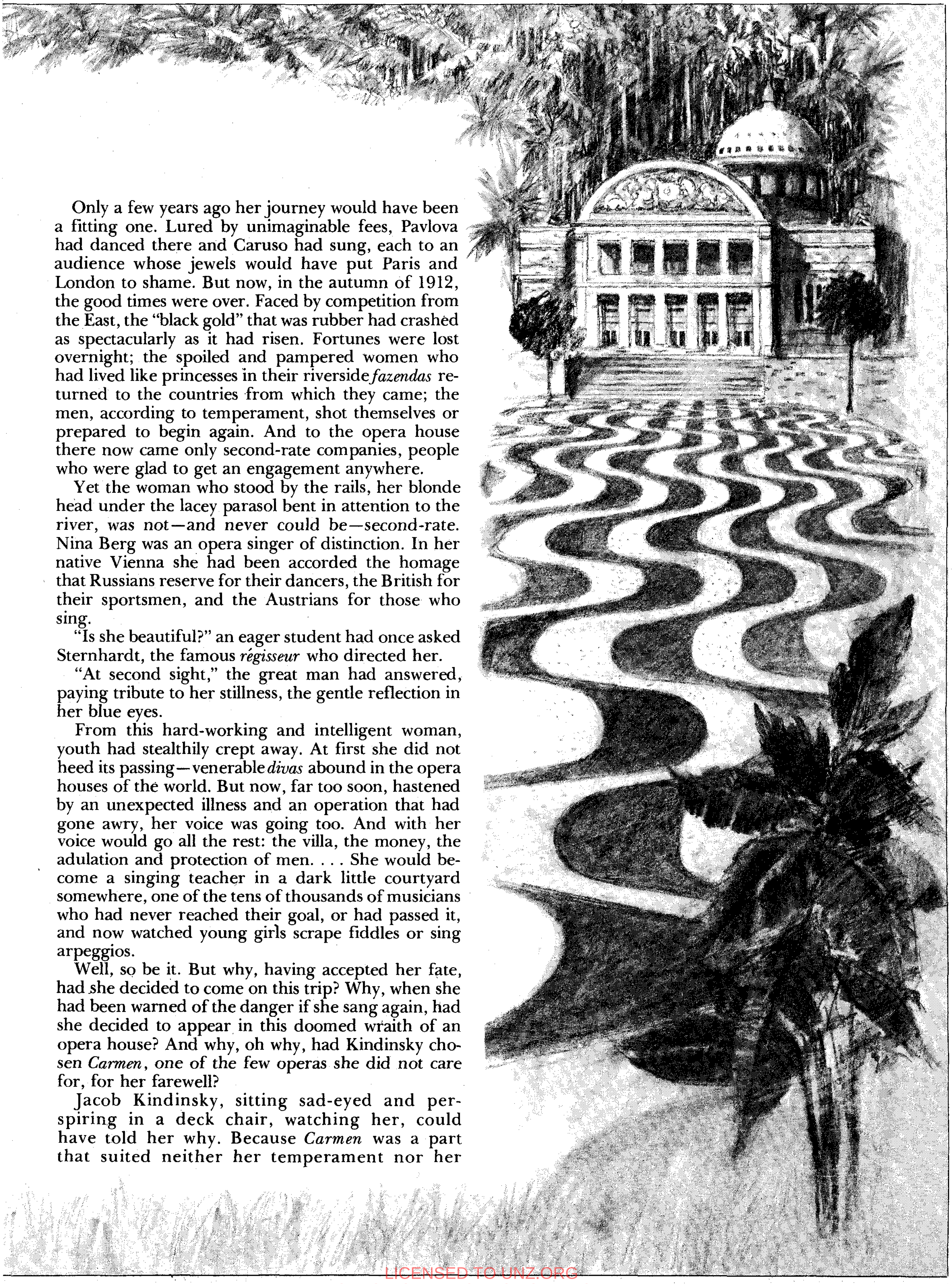
*There was all eternity for them to be together—God could not be so wrathful that He would separate them twice*

She had not expected it to be so beautiful.

In Vienna, in her luxurious villa near Schönbrunn, she had read about the "Green Hell" of the Amazon. Now, standing by the rails of the steamer on the last day of her thousand-mile voyage up the "River Sea," she was in a shimmering world in which trees grew from the dusky water only to find themselves in turn embraced by ferns and fronds and brilliantly colored orchids. An alligator slid from a gleaming sandbar into the leaf-stained shallows; the gray skeleton of a deodar, its roots asphyxiated by the water, was aflame with scarlet iris.

She was bound for a city that, even in the few decades of its existence, had become a legend: fabled Manaus with its rococo mansions, its mosaic sidewalks, and exquisite shops . . . a city of unbelievable luxury and sophistication thrown up by the wealthy rubber barons in the mazelike and watery jungle to rival the capitals of Europe they had left behind. And in particular—since she was a singer—for the prime jewel in the exotic city's heart: the opera house, the Teatra Amazonas—the loveliest, they said, in all the Americas.

### A short story by Eva Ibbotson



Only a few years ago her journey would have been a fitting one. Lured by unimaginable fees, Pavlova had danced there and Caruso had sung, each to an audience whose jewels would have put Paris and London to shame. But now, in the autumn of 1912, the good times were over. Faced by competition from the East, the "black gold" that was rubber had crashed as spectacularly as it had risen. Fortunes were lost overnight; the spoiled and pampered women who had lived like princesses in their riverside *fazendas* returned to the countries from which they came; the men, according to temperament, shot themselves or prepared to begin again. And to the opera house there now came only second-rate companies, people who were glad to get an engagement anywhere.

Yet the woman who stood by the rails, her blonde head under the lacey parasol bent in attention to the river, was not—and never could be—second-rate. Nina Berg was an opera singer of distinction. In her native Vienna she had been accorded the homage that Russians reserve for their dancers, the British for their sportsmen, and the Austrians for those who sing.

"Is she beautiful?" an eager student had once asked Sternhardt, the famous *régisseur* who directed her.

"At second sight," the great man had answered, paying tribute to her stillness, the gentle reflection in her blue eyes.

From this hard-working and intelligent woman, youth had stealthily crept away. At first she did not heed its passing—venerable *divas* abound in the opera houses of the world. But now, far too soon, hastened by an unexpected illness and an operation that had gone awry, her voice was going too. And with her voice would go all the rest: the villa, the money, the adulation and protection of men. . . . She would become a singing teacher in a dark little courtyard somewhere, one of the tens of thousands of musicians who had never reached their goal, or had passed it, and now watched young girls scrape fiddles or sing arpeggios.

Well, so be it. But why, having accepted her fate, had she decided to come on this trip? Why, when she had been warned of the danger if she sang again, had she decided to appear in this doomed wraith of an opera house? And why, oh why, had Kindinsky chosen *Carmen*, one of the few operas she did not care for, for her farewell?

Jacob Kindinsky, sitting sad-eyed and perspiring in a deck chair, watching her, could have told her why. Because *Carmen* was a part that suited neither her temperament nor her voice, and he did not choose to be disturbed by seeing her bring to her last Violetta or Mimi her unique quality of bewilderment at the loss, the inexplicable passing of happiness. It was bad enough, thought Jacob, to have to come to this unspeakable place full, it seemed, of boa constrictors and electric eels. Bad enough to be broiled alive by the sun and in the end, in all probability, not even *paid*, without having to submit to Nina's devastating empathy with those doomed and great-hearted girls. Whereas as Carmen, singing opposite that Milanese bullock, Padrocci, now snoring under the fan in his cabin, keeping abreast of the ludicrous tempos which that clown Feuerbach would imagine to be "South American," she would be compelled into the routine heel-tapping, fan-clicking performance—and Feuerbach's imbecile crescendos would drown those heart-rending breaks in her top notes.

Now Jacob, who could hardly bear what was happening to Nina, found himself wondering for the first time in years if they had done the right thing—he and Sternhardt, who had become her *régisseur*, and Fallheim, the Director of the Academy— when they had sent that boy away. Jacob had been with Fallheim at that last interview during which they had finally persuaded him that he was harming Nina and standing in her way. He had never forgotten the look in the boy's eyes, but he had forgotten his name. Stefan? Georg? Karl?

The boy's name had been Paul—Paul Varlov—and Nina, watching with her customary quiet attention a flock of green and orange parakeets, had not forgotten it. It was, she could have said (without hysteria, without hyperbole), stamped into the marrow of her bones.

He'd been twenty-three. . . . A Russian father, a Hungarian mother, educated by some whim in an English public school and, when Nina met him, a student at the University of Vienna. Nations and causes bubbled and boiled in him—just to touch him was to risk burning, he was so terribly alive. With his too large, too dark eyes, his high cheekbones and olive skin, he was an outlandish figure among his phlegmatic classmates, yet everywhere he went he was surrounded by friends who clung to him like puppies, lapping at his obsessions: the novels of Dostoevski, the Brotherhood of Man, the fate of the pigeons on the roof of Vienna's cathedral, the Stefansdom. . . . He made speeches, waving his searingly beautiful hands, on freedom for Hungary, swam the Danube, discovered the Secessionists, made yogurt in his landlady's button boots. . . .

Then, at a Mahler concert (standing room only) he found himself next to a girl, golden-haired and gentle, with a sweet, wide mouth and tender eyes.

Nina was twenty, studying piano and singing at the Academy. Paul's friends parted to let her through and closed ranks again behind her.

She was home.

Her innocence at that time was total. She believed herself to be an indifferent student, seeing in the extra work, the harsher criticism that her professors handed out to her, only evidence of her own inadequacy. Everyone else in the Academy knew of her promise but not she.

Now, in any case, she forgot her studies, forgot everything except the glory of being alive and loved by Paul. The selflessness and modesty that were her hallmark enabled her to respond completely to his passion. Uniquely, for someone so young, she never got in the way of her own happiness.

So it was spring in Vienna: in the Prater, the violets; on the slopes of the Wienerwald, the greening larches. And everywhere—in the cafés, the parks, floating from the windows of the gray, stone-garlanded houses—music. Sometimes the friends came, unexacting and affectionate as spaniels; sometimes Nina and Paul were alone. Their love was so immense it spilled over to embrace the children bowling their hoops in the Tiergarten, the waiters in restaurants who paused, leaning on their brass trays, to tell them the stories of their lives. They stood, marveling, their fingers interlaced, before the quiet Dürers in the Albertina; they adopted an aging llama in the Kaiser's zoo, danced to the open-air bands under the linden trees. . . .

One night from a deserted garden in Grinzing, Paul pilfered for her an early, perfect, snow-white rose. They were the first roses, he told her, sprung from the tears of the angel who had been compelled to lead Eve from Paradise. He would find them for her always, he said, and when she laughed and spoke of winter he said there could be no winter while they loved. That night she stayed with him. She was a Catholic—it was mortal sin. But, for the rest of her life, when she heard the word "joy," it was to the memory of the sin that she returned.

If Paul had one characteristic above all others, it was a high intelligence. There was no moment when he did not understand that what existed between Nina and him was a God-given gift, entire, enduring and sublime. And young as he was, he began, without a second's hesitation, to undergo the paperwork and practicalities that would make possible their marriage.

It was now that the Academy began to sit up and take notice. Nina was sent for and informed of her potentially glorious future as an opera singer. She was surprised and pleased that her voice was good and told them, with her gentle smile, that she was going to marry Paul Varlov and go abroad with him. The Director, horrified, sent for Sternhardt, the opera's famous *régisseur* who had earmarked both the voice and, when the time was ripe, the woman.

Nina, serene as a golden lotus, stayed firm.

So they turned on Paul. He had not known of the future that awaited her. To be a singer in Vienna is to be a little bit divine. Aware of this, wanting only what was right for her, Paul listened.

And so, into the Eden that those two had created, their elders introduced the poison apple of self-sacrifice. Benign, experienced, twice his age, they bore down on the boy, keeping their visits secret from Nina, emphasizing again and again her promise, her glittering future, the life of an acclaimed and dedicated artist that awaited her and that marriage and child-bearing and poverty would put forever out of reach.

Paul was only twenty-three. The call they made was one to which youth has always rallied: the sacrifice of happiness, of life itself, for a high ideal. After weeks of sleeplessness, Paul lost his fine perception of the truth and reached out, blind and despairing, for their poisoned fruit.

One day Nina, going to his room, found the friends grouped like figures in a pietà—and on the pillow, his last gift to her: a single, long-stemmed, snow-white rose.

She never saw him again.

The clanging of the ship's bell made Nina turn. They had come to one of the sights of Amazonia: the "Wedding of the Waters" where, at the confluence of the two rivers, the leaf-brown waters of the Amazon flowed distinct and separate, beside the acid, jet-black waters of the Negro to within sight of Manaus.

Responding to the bell, there now emerged Padrocci, the tenor, in crumpled mauve pajamas, the ludicrous Feuerbach with his mustache cups, the disheveled members of the chorus, to peer over the rails and exclaim.

"Oh God," thought Jacob Kindinsky, indifferent as always to the marvels of nature. "What scum is this that I have brought to sing with Nina?"

But as they steamed up the Negro, past the neglected, once-splendid planters' houses, past sheds where ocelot and jaguar pelts hung out to dry, he heard her draw in her breath.

"Look, Jacob! There it is!"

He looked. A dazzling, soaring dome of blue and green and gold surmounted by the Eagle of Brazil . . . a glimpse of marble pillars, a glittering facade. . . . The Teatra Amazonas would have been lovely anywhere. Here, in the midst of the steamy, dusky jungle, it was staggering.

And the fading opera star and the little Jacob who loved her turned and smiled at each other, for after all there was no disgrace here. This place would make a fitting ending to their pilgrimage.

A few hours before "curtain up," the thing happened which Jacob had known would happen. Nina, unpacking in her sumptuous but already mildewed dressing room, asked for a white rose.

"Nina, we are in the *Amazon*," he cried. "You have *seen* the flowers! They are probably full of dead birds they have eaten for their dinner."

"Please, Jacob."

So it ended as it always ended: as it had in Berlin during a blizzard that had cut off all supplies to the city; in Paris, with the streets sealed for some visiting dignitary so that Jacob, with an hour to spare, found himself begging for a single bud from a bad-tempered gardener in the Tuileries; in Bucharest, where every available rose had been pounded into attar for the tourist trade.

"You cannot wear a *white* rose for *Carmen*," Sternhardt had yelled at her, years and years ago when he had at last persuaded her to try the mezzo role. "Carmen wears red flowers always—scarlet, crimson—she is a gypsy!"

But Nina, who stood so patiently while they fitted her costumes, who would put herself out for the most insignificant member of the chorus, only said very quietly that if they wanted her to sing Carmen they would have to find her a white rose. And as with Carmen so with Violetta (whether or not she was the "dame aux camélias"), with Mimi and Gilda and Butterfly.

So now poor Jacob stepped out of the resplendent foyer with its gilded mirrors and corpulent muses, to search among the frangipani, the hibiscus, and the voracious orchids in that steam bath of a city, for the flower that alone linked this lovely, deeply weary woman to her youth.

In his ornate, gold-leaf and red plush box next to the stage, a man whose look of extreme distinction even the past months of strain and agony could not eradicate, waited—entirely without interest—for the curtain to rise.

As usual in these times of slump and mismanagement, there had been confusion about the posters. The company was second-rate, the opera was *Carmen*—that was all he knew, and it was enough to have kept him away had he not had an evening to kill before the tycoon from São Paulo to whom he was selling *The Firefly* would come. Everything else was sold already: the other boats, the carriages, the antique silver and fine furniture he had had shipped from Europe. Only for Follina itself had he found no purchaser; soon now the lovely Palladian yellow-stucco house with its blue shutters, its flower-wreathed arcades, its fountains and terraces, would vanish in the murderous embrace of the jungle from which he'd wrested it.

## Discovery

*by Gladys McKee*

*If only you had listened*
*with your heart,*
*you would have heard*
*the words I didn't say . . .*
*that each and every time we meet*
*I find I love you*
*in a different way.*
*Sometimes because your eyes*
*hold hidden dreams,*
*or because I guess*
*your dear, your shy*
*soft tenderness*
*that you would rather hide.*
*I have no plan*
*to tell you all of these things;*
*words play no part.*
*I wait your kiss,*
*your coming,*
*to the haven of my heart.*

"Look, Mother, there's Mr. Varlov! So he can't be in prison yet," said the convent-fresh daughter of a Portuguese customs official, looking raptly at the solitary figure in the box.

"Don't stare, dear," said her mother, irritably aware that neither disgrace nor bankruptcy would dim the image of this curiously magnetic figure in her daughter's eyes.

But the girl's father did stare, and nodded, for it seemed to him that Varlov had been given a raw deal. Though he was once among the wealthiest of the planters and hospitable to a fault, Varlov had not indulged in the pranks of so many of the others—washing their carriage horses in champagne, sending their shirts back to Paris to be laundered. Varlov had built houses for the *serengueiros* who tended his thousands of acres of wild rubber, and schools for their children. It was to save these that he had gone to Rio when the crash came, to successfully raise more money. The means he used were illegal, but at the time he could not have known he was doing anything against the law. Now he was left facing, along with the men he had trusted, a charge of malpractice and of fraud.

Leaning back, indifferent to the looks he was attracting, Paul looked round the opera house that he had helped to bring into being. It was he who had insisted on the best Carrara marble, he who had suggested that de Angelis himself be brought from Italy to paint the ceilings. He had put thousands from his own money into this crazy, lovely building—and for one reason only. Obsessionally, doggedly, idiotically, Paul had been convinced that one day she would come.

Well, she had not come. He had entertained Charetti and her entire company from La Scala with a seven-course banquet on *The Firefly*, had taken half a Russian *corps de ballet* stricken with yellow fever back to Follina to be nursed. . . .

But she had not come and never would come now. It was over.

Jacob had found a rose. Feuerbach, twisting his idiotic mustache into imagined perfection, went to the conductor's podium. Padrocci completed the egg-swallowing and *mi-mi-mi*-ing routine so beloved of bad tenors all over the world and was eased into the uniform of Don José.

The curtain rose. Soldiers and passers-by, hopelessly sparse on the too-big stage, wandered about. Padrocci made his entrance. He had burst a button on his tunic and was already a quarter tone flat.

In his box, Paul Varlov yawned.

Carmen appeared on the steps of the cigarette factory, was greeted by the crowd, moved forward, getting into position for her *habanera*. A heavy black wig, a flounced skirt—in her hair a rose. . . .

In the stage box a man stood up, threw out an arm, spoke some unintelligible words. He was glared at, hushed.

Nina looked up. Across the glare of the footlights, from a distance at which normally she could distinguish nothing, she saw him, understood why she had come—and began to sing.

What happened next was a miracle. Jacob Kindinsky said so, anyway, and he should have known. The kind of miracle that enables mothers to leap across a chasm between towering buildings to rescue a child threatened by fire, or that makes mortally wounded pilots land their planes safely behind the lines. For Nina now sang as she had sung at the height of her glory. Her illness, the effect of her operation, ceased to exist. "Sing with your voice, with your heart, with your life," St. Augustine had begged, and so now sang Nina Berg—forcing from Padrocci, as the opera continued, a decent, near-musical performance, and from Feuerbach, a respect for Bizet's subtle score.

The first interval found Jacob in tears and Paul Varlov sitting in his box as if carved from stone. "I *cannot* have to do it again," he silently implored the Fates. "I *cannot*."

For the first moments following the ecstasy and shock of seeing her, hope had soared. Even with the heavy makeup he could see how she had aged. The fact that she was appearing with this appalling company at all seemed to indicate her career was over. In which case, surely, he had a right . . . even disgraced and bankrupt as he was. . . . But as she began to sing he knew it was not so. She was exactly what they had foretold: a great and glorious artist. If she was here it was for some chivalrous reason of her own.

The curtain rose again. Padrocci, pawing the white rose with his hot, fat hands, managed the Flower Song, and Paul, watching him, smiled crookedly. There was one gift and one gift only that he grudged the encroaching jungle. The greenhouse at Follina, with its latticed screens, its fan and ice machine, where, to the puzzlement of his gardeners, he had coaxed and bullied from the black soil of Amazonia a sweetly scented, snow-white rose.

Carmen read her doom in the cards, sent José away, and went forward to her death. . . . Right at the end the strain did begin to tell and Jacob cowering, waited for the first telltale crack in her voice but Feuerbach, near home now, was rampant again and no one noticed.

The curtain fell on an ovation. The audience rose, stamped, roared. Flowers rained on the stage. Nina took curtain call upon curtain call, leading forward the stunned Padrocci, the simpering Feuerbach. She was not at all impatient and hardly glanced at Paul's box. There was all time, all eternity now, for them to be together. Even she could not imagine a God so wrathful that he would separate them twice.

The delay before she could escape from the theater gave Paul his chance. He sent a note to the stage door and made his way quickly down to the docks. He was selling *The Firefly* fully equipped and his Indian crew had been persuaded to stay on and work for the new owner. If he worked fast it could be done—her own devastating humility would aid him. But he thought it might be the last thing he would do.

Hurriedly he gave his instructions: a perfect, intimate dinner for two on deck; the Venetian candlesticks; the best champagne—and not a word to Madame, not a single word to indicate that *The Firefly* was no longer his.

They nodded, pleased to serve him once again. They would not betray him and spoke, in any case, only their own language.

Time, now, to go to the riverside café he had suggested for their rendezvous.

◆

*Give all to love;*  
*Obey thy heart;*  
*Friends, kindred, days,*  
*Estate, good-fame,*  
*Plans, credit and the Muse,—*  
*Nothing refuse.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson  
Give All to Love

She came as he had asked; alone, in a hansom, telling no one where she was going. As she stepped out and the lamplight shone on her well-remembered face, he felt a moment of rage that time had dared so patently to lay his hand on her. Then it was over. This was Nina. She, in her turn, had not even such a moment for he was handsomer than ever, the skin taut over those incredible bones, the streaks of silver highlighting his jet-black hair.

"Come," he said, allowing himself once, and once only, to touch her hand. "We're going to have dinner on my yacht."

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

She followed him like a child. She wanted to go on saying yes to everything: yes to the lapping of the river; yes to the hot night and the cry of the frogs; yes to the future—yes even to the lonely, agonizing past since it had led her to this place. She was so totally shiveringly happy that she made a characteristic gesture, laying a finger sideways across her lips so as not to cry out and Paul remembering it, stumbled for a moment as he led her aboard.

"What a beautiful yacht, Paul!"

"Yes. She's the fastest on the river. I have four others: a schooner, a motor launch. . . ." He began to show off, boring her with tonnage figures and details of the luxurious fittings he had had installed. Useless. She seemed enchanted at his success; to regard it as absolutely natural that he should boast like a silly boy.

"Oh, I *knew* you'd do well! Tell me everything! Start with *now*. Where do you live?"

A servant had taken her cloak and drawn out a chair at the snowy, candlelit table on the front deck. She took a roll, began to crumble it—then looked up at him to see if he remembered.

Yes, he remembered. They had always kept a handful of crumbs from every meal they ate together, and gone afterwards to find a one-legged pigeon who roosted between the feet of a particular Gothic saint above the West Door of the Stefansdom. A good life they had given that pigeon who had abandoned thereafter any efforts to support himself.

Deliberately he looked away, refusing the shared intimacy, and began to describe his house. "It was built by an Italian over a hundred years ago—an exact copy of the *palazzo* in his native

*(Continued on page 70)*

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

# Lucy Grey

Transworld

### BY JANIS COLES

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

# Lucy Grey

I read the slim, elegant card with dismay and then said as calmly as I could, “Pray show up Sir Giles, Betsy.”

*“Here,* ma’am?”

I had intended to receive my husband’s brother for the first time in the drawing room, but now decided to make no pretense and meet him in what was clearly a schoolroom. “Here, Betsy,” I said firmly. “If Sir Giles decides to arrive early he must accept me as I am. And bring Master Hal here when I ring.”

“Yes ’m,” she said, clearly bewildered by the sudden change of plan. “But you *did* ask me to lay out your silk gown.”

“I know.” I paused, unsure of my actions even to myself. “But I’m a school mistress and see no reason why I should try to hide the fact.”

Nevertheless, as Betsy left to show in my august visitor, I wished I had kept my original intentions. A black skirt and severe white blouse would hardly serve to impress him; and already regretting my whim, I straightened my belt and tucked back a straying strand of hair, as the door opened to admit a tall figure.

For a moment Sir Giles Grey and I viewed each other. Involuntarily I recalled my father’s words: “I believe I would have served under him willingly,” he had said after the only time they had met, and certainly the man before me held himself with a commanding air. Cool gray eyes met mine before he curtly bowed.

“Your servant, Marm,” he said.

Offering the briefest of curtseys in reply I indicated a chair as I seated myself and folded my hands in my lap with all the signs of the composure I was far from feeling. There was silence in the sunlit room and I knew he intended that I should begin the conversation.

Taking a deep breath I looked up and found my visitor’s eyes upon me. His gaze was cold and shrewd, and involuntarily my hand moved to cover a recent darn in my shirt. As the resulting gleam of amusement told me Sir Giles was only too aware of my intention, I quickly brushed away an imaginary speck of dust.

“You sent for me, Mrs. Grey,” he prompted, not bothering to hide his slight impatience.

“As you know, sir, my father died almost a year ago,” I began quickly.

“Forgive me; but did I not convey what was right and proper at the time?”

I eyed his blank face sternly. “Of course you did. You have been most punctilious about such things,” I told him.

“Then I confess I am at a loss.” He smoothed his gloves, laid them on top of his glossy tall hat and set the lot on the floor at his feet, reluctantly for a longer stay than he had intended. “Pray enlighten me, Marm.”

I pleated my skirt and, aware of his eyes on my nervous fingers, hastily smoothed the creased material. “When my husband was killed—after Balaclava, you offered a financial settlement for myself and Hal.”

“Which I understand you refused,” the man opposite said.

I faltered into silence.

“Circumstances—quite beyond my control—make it impossible for me to bring up my son as his father would have wished.”

“And having refused our good offices once you now find yourself needing our assistance. Mrs. Grey, you

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should have thought of this possibility before and not been so impulsive when we offered help after my brother died."

Looking at him steadily I checked my rising temper. "Your offer, Sir Giles, was hardly couched in the kindest or most friendly of terms. Your family had already made it abundantly clear when I mourned Harry that it wished to have nothing to do with anyone so far beneath them as an army surgeon's daughter."

"May I remind you, Marm, that pride is considered one of the seven sins."

His rich voice hung in the air as I fought to control myself. To be accused of pride by one so obviously filled with aristocratic arrogance made me almost gasp with rage. Staring at my visitor with silent wrath, something in his expression made me wonder suddenly if he was trying to provoke me; and with the suspicion I instantly grew calm.

"Indeed, sir, so I have always considered," I said demurely, knowing I had scored a hit when a hastily suppressed spark of amusement lit up his gray gaze.

"Then we are at least in agreement," Sir Giles assured me. Settling back on his chair a shaft of sunlight struck his head, and I saw that his glossy hair was not black as I had first supposed, but rather the color of darkest mahogany. "As head of the family I am prepared to make a financial settlement upon you—but there will be certain requirements you will have to meet. They might be unwelcome to you, but I must insist upon your signed agreement."

My heart began to pound against my ribs. "I feel it only right to say first, that I would never give up my son. I am persuaded that Harry—that my husband—would never have agreed to such an arrangement, however desperate our circumstances."

"I would never demand anything so unnatural," Sir Giles said, almost gently. "Have no fear of that. I merely desire that you and your son should agree to live with us, and that I should have the final word concerning his upbringing—with your agreement; I shall settle upon him a certain amount for his education and make a quarterly payment to you for your own uses." Noticing my hesitation, his voice grew steely. "I would remind you that I am the boy's legal guardian and as such I *could* remove him from your care."

The world seemed to stand still. Outside a cab horse trotted past, his hooves clattering noisily over the cobbles below the window.

"You wouldn't," I heard myself whisper. "No one could be so cruel; he's only a little boy, and he needs me."

"Perhaps you have the greater need of him."

Again his voice hung in the air as I raised my head suddenly to stare across the room. "Since Harry died we have had need of each other," I admitted.

"May I inquire after his schooling?"

"I have taken care of that myself," I said quickly.

His gray eyes traveled about the schoolroom, taking in the well-worn stools and ink-stained desks, resting on my chalk-smeared fingers before he sighed audibly. "Mrs. Grey, I needn't remind you that a primary school run by elderly women is hardly fitting for a scion of the Greys."

Locking my shaking fingers together I stared at a point above his gleaming head. "My education was not neglected, sir. I feel better equipped to teach than most governesses."

"Indeed?" Again his glance traveled about the bare, sun-filled room. "Then may I inquire why your attempt at educating the young has so clearly failed?"

I gritted my teeth. "Because, Sir Giles, the local merchants and shopkeepers forget that their daughters have the brains God gave them and wish to bring them up as useless ladylike creatures whose only talent is to toy with the pianoforte, and whose only ambition is to snare a husband richer than their father."

Sir Giles was clearly amused. "And what would you have taught them?"

"Nothing outlandish," I answered promptly. "Only what our mothers were taught before this ridiculous desire for male domination became the fashion."

"I take it that you have turned the local maidens into blue-stockings and sowed the seeds of feminine dissent?"

"Neither," I answered grimly. "My father neglected to have me educated in the art of performing upon the piano."

I waited for the laugh that would surely follow my statement, but instead my words were met with silence. "I can read the globes—indeed I know as much about India as any returning soldier," I told him fiercely. "I speak French and my command of Hindustani is considered above average. I write a legible hand and have a clear understanding of history and mathematics."

"And still the merchant Mamas wanted their daughters taught the perplexities of the keyboard. Mrs. Grey, you have my sympathies."

I looked at him with suspicion, but he met my eyes blandly. "You agree with me?" I asked, surprised.

He stood up and strolled to the window, glancing at the street below. "As one whose ears have often been assaulted by the musical performance of many a dutiful daughter, I would be in favor of anything that might give cause to fewer virtuoso evenings." Suddenly he looked directly at me, and with the light behind him his eyes appeared much darker, almost violet. "However, in all seriousness I must confess that I prefer women who are decorative and relaxing to be with."

His eyes strayed over my hair, drawn back in a chignon, my plain white blouse tucked into a severe black skirt, that only a very modest crinoline held out—and I knew he found me lacking.

I said challengingly, "There are many who would find it infinitely boring to be such a female."

"I am sure you are right," he agreed gently. "But then you see such creatures are born, not made. The less fortunate females have to work and find occupations to support themselves."

I looked at him. "Are you inferring, Sir Giles, that I should have made a comfortable marriage rather than have tried to support Harry and myself?"

"Of course I would have had to approve of the match, but it might have been more convenient."

"For whom?" I asked more angrily than I intended.

"For you, of course. Then our business could have been conducted between our men of affairs—"

"And you would have been spared the necessity of this visit. Had I realized the preciousness of your time, sir, I would not have written to you."

"I was thinking more of you, Mrs. Grey. It can hardly be pleasant either to beg for help, or to have to admit how wrong you have been in thinking you could manage without my aid. This all could have been settled years ago, if only you had pocketed your pride."

"Pride." I jumped to my feet. "You mistake the matter." In my agitation I walked about the room, stopping beside the table, grasping the worn edges with both hands. "I had just learned of my husband's death in the Crimea, my father was with his regiment in India, and when I applied to you for—not help or even assistance, but *comfort*—I received a visit from a lawyer's clerk and a bill for ten pounds!"

"I admit that things were ill-managed," Sir Giles retorted. "I can claim little credit for being abroad at the time. My mother was understandably upset at her son's death."

"How so? She can have cared very little for him to have treated him in such a manner when he married me."

"My mother has a very deep sense of family. Forgive me, but her ambitions for Harry ended when he made a marriage of love rather than seek a wife with fortune and connections." He waited for my reply, and when I made none, not even looking up, he beat an impatient tattoo on the window sill with his nails. "We must come to some agreement, Marm. Will you come to live at Grey Towers?"

Rubbing at an ink stain with one finger, I inwardly admitted I had no choice and nodded reluctantly.

"Then I shall ask my man of affairs to call on you with the necessary papers. He will also tell you of train times, arrange the tickets and so on." His voice died away and he eyed me with speculation. "My mother, Mrs. Grey, leads a wide social life, in which you will be expected to join. I realize, of course, you presently have no need for the kind of clothing that will be necessary at Grey Towers. Might I suggest that I arrange an account in your name at the bigger London shops. By coincidence, my sister's maid is in London on her way to join her mistress. I am sure she would be willing to accompany you on your expeditions."

I smiled a little at his tactfulness and was not foolish enough to refuse his offer, knowing only too well that the few shabby items in my meager wardrobe would not serve at my new home.

"And now, may I meet my kinsman?" Sir Giles asked, and I rang the bell summoning Betsy.

Almost immediately the door was opened and the small figure of my son appeared in the doorway, the sun making a halo of his golden curls.

"Hal," I said quietly, stretching out a hand. "Come and meet your Papa's brother, Sir Giles."

The boy hesitated, then came slowly into the room, staring up at the tall man by the window. Instead of taking my hand and hiding behind me as I expected, he advanced almost to Sir Giles's feet. "Are you a soldier?" he asked.

"I was," the man answered gravely, "but resigned when your Papa joined the Guards."

"Why?"

"Because it is not wise to have too many of the same family in the army at one time. It means—that the ladies and children get rather lonely."

"Mama is lonely."

"Is she?" His gray eyes flickered in my direction. "How would you like to come and live with me in the country?"

To my surprise Hal said that nothing would please him more, and I saw with amazement he had clearly taken to his new kinsman. Trying not to feel betrayed, I smiled and listened while Sir Giles chatted with my son, clearly setting out to win his confidence.

Soon he rose to take his leave. "I'll see you in Hampshire, then," he said.

"I am grateful for your kindness," I began dutifully, but was stopped by a tightening of the grasp on my fingers.

"Let us have no pretense between us, Marm," said my visitor. "Both you and I know that kindness doesn't enter into the matter."

"Nevertheless, I *am* grateful," I repeated quietly.

He gave a harsh bark of laughter. "We'll see how you feel after you've endured a few months at the New House. Beatrice and I aren't the easiest of mortals. I don't doubt that you and young Harry will find it difficult to fit into our regime, and I must warn you plainly, Marm, that I have the greatest dislike of my routine being upset."

"Harry and I will endeavor to be as accommodating as possible," I promised with resignation. With another elegant bow he was gone, leaving me staring at the door, seething with conflicting emotions.

"Why do you look so angry, Mama?" asked Hal. "Don't you like him? Why do we have to go and live with him if you don't like him?"

"Of course I don't dislike Sir Giles," I said hastily, and knelt to hug the small body against me. "I'm sure we'll be happy in Hampshire. There'll be a big garden with room for you to play and trees to climb. But first we get to go shopping and buy lots of new things. Won't that be delightful?"

Privately I had to admit dismay at the prospect. However, Lady Isobel's maid, when she came, proved to be a kind creature and, after our meeting with her approval, threw herself wholeheartedly into the task of outfitting Harry and me in a manner suited to our new style of living at the Greys' estate.

The amount of money spent only increased my dismay. The extravagance of four evening gowns, which I was assured was the minimum necessary, caused me to economize by refusing to buy a half dozen nightdresses—only to fall prey to a dressing gown of the softest wool in a sweet shade of pale pink, which I simply could not resist.

I was still shaken by such dreadful extravagance when the hansom returned us to the door of the house where we had lived for the past three years. Until now the peeling paint and dirty windows of the shabby street had almost escaped my notice but with eyes newly accustomed to the splendors of the wealthy streets through which we had driven that afternoon, and the bright colors and riches of the huge shops we had frequented, I realized how the neighborhood must have appeared to Sir Giles.

I gathered up a few parcels, made sure Hal was with me and turned to climb the steps to the door, suddenly aware of a figure about to descend. Looking up I saw a woman of about my own age, dressed, as I saw with my new clear sight, with all the shabby gentility of someone trying to keep up appearances with very little money.

"Mrs. Grey?" she asked with a little hesitation.

*Kindness in women, not their beauteous*
*looks,*
*Shall win my love.*

William Shakespeare
The Taming of the Shrew

"Yes. Did you want me?"

"My name is Frazer—Emily Frazer. We've never met, but I knew Captain Grey in the Crimea."

Sensing the anxiety behind her quietly spoken words, I looked at her quickly, before knocking sharply at the front door. "Let us talk inside," I said. "Perhaps you would take tea with me?"

Soon we were in the parlor exchanging pleasantries. After Betsy had brought the tray and departed, I poured out the steaming liquid and handed my visitor a cup before asking her the question that hovered on my lips.

"I was a nurse with Miss Nightingale," she answered quietly and my heart stopped at all that might mean.

"Then you were at—"

"Sartari," she supplied. "Yes I was."

"And that was where you met my husband?"

She put down her cup and touched her lips delicately with a white handkerchief. "I nursed many men, Mrs. Grey," she said quietly, "but I remember Captain Grey very well. He was one of the bravest men I've ever met—even in the holocaust of the Crimea, he stands out. He entrusted me with a few personal trinkets which he wanted you to have."

I stared down at the gold watch on its slender chain and the small silver box for matches that she dropped in my lap. Convulsively my hand closed over them. "I wondered what . . . I had assumed these lost," I whispered, and looking up saw an unfathomable expression in her pale eyes. "But it has been three years since Balaclava, Mrs. Frazer," I pointed out, seeking an explanation.

"I know, and doubtless you will wonder why I've taken so long in returning them to you. After the war I was ill—most of us were—and then my son, whom I'd left with my parents, needed me."

"Of course. I understand, and indeed I am most grateful to you for bringing my husband's possessions to me. Do you reside in London, Mrs. Frazer?"

My visitor shook her head. "Since returning from the Crimea, I have followed the profession of a governess. Between positions I return to my parents' home in Dorset."

"And your little boy?"

"Stays with his grandparents." She smiled warmly. "Harry is the only one of us to be pleased when I am out of a position." Involuntarily she glanced down at the darned gloves in her lap and sighed.

"You'll let me reimburse you for any expenses incurred?" I offered impulsively.

"I was traveling across London anyway. . . ." She hesitated, and I smiled encouragingly. "Perhaps I might call again? My work often brings me to the capital, and to think I had a friend here would be comforting. . . "

"I should be delighted. However, I am to leave here shortly. If you gave me your address I could get in touch if I hear of anything that might be of interest to you. Perhaps in my new circle I may meet with a family in need of a governess."

Soon after we parted, I watched from the window as she walked along the road, never dreaming that our paths were to cross again. And so within a fortnight of each other I met Sir Giles Grey and Emily Frazer—two people who were to have a profound effect upon the lives of both myself and my son.

I drew on my gloves and smoothed my hair while we waited in the hall for the cabman to ring the doorbell. The journey along crowded streets was quickly accomplished and soon we stood in the huge expanse of Waterloo station. Betsy and Hal gazed about in wide-eyed wonder. I had seen it before, while accompanying my soldier father on his journeys to and from Aldershot, and was not so impressed. A porter found our seats, and we had just climbed into the carriage and were making ourselves comfortable when the door was opened again and a familiar figure looked in at us.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey—Hal," said Sir Giles, taking in the mild confusion caused in the confined space by two crinolines, several pieces of hand luggage, a picnic box and one excited small boy.

"I had not supposed that you intended to accompany us," I said coolly.

"I had not supposed so myself," Sir Giles told me, cheerfully seating himself beside my son. "However, business having been settled earlier than I expected I thought we might as well travel down together."

I looked at him a little uncertain, but he met my eyes blandly and soon turned to busying himself by pointing out various landmarks to Hal. For a while I was content to follow his finger and listen to the quick chatter from my son. Later, while Hal played with his monkey-on-a-stick and Betsy dozed against the window, Sir Giles sat in his corner and ostensibly watched the passing countryside. But I was well aware that his gaze was often on my face. Trying to avoid his eyes proved difficult so I gave up at last and stared boldly back.

His lips twitched and I raised my own eyebrow in query. "I was thinking that you present an entirely different appearance from when I saw you first," he explained in a voice for my ears alone.

"I should have thanked you for my allowance," I began, but was stopped by his disparaging gesture. Suddenly I realized that what had meant so much to me meant very little to its donor. I bit my lip and fell silent, while his gray eyes grew amused. "What time will we arrive at Grey Towers?" I asked after a little while, my voice as indifferent as I could make it.

Sir Giles shrugged and consulted a large silver watch he took from a waistcoat pocket. "The train seems to be on time, so we should arrive at the station a little after two o'clock. The carriage will be waiting, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, though at my disparaging tone his eyebrows drew together.

"I have a carriage, Mrs. Grey—several in fact—and a coachman employed especially to drive them. Can you think of a reason why our equipage should not be waiting for us?"

"Indeed no," I answered honestly. "I was merely thinking how easy and comfortable life is for the rich."

His eyes were cold and hard, having lost all color as he regarded me steadily, and although I had no intention of even admitting it, my husband's brother roused something like apprehension in me. He was obviously used to being the master of any situation and most persons, and I . . . I had been used to ordering my own life. I felt Sir Giles and I would not get on and foresaw our coming trial of strength with a sense of dread.

The journey wore on, and soothed by the soporific effect of the rocking carriage I too fell asleep, only to be awakened some time later by a change in the train's movement. "We are almost there," said Sir Giles, and I hastily retied the strings of my bonnet before waking Hal and Betsy.

Hal was again overcome with excitement when he saw the big gray horse pulling the wagon sent to carry our boxes and trunks. Nothing would satisfy him but to ride between the driver and Betsy on the seat high above its broad back. Sir Giles and I rode alone in the luxurious barouche drawn by the two handsome bays.

The journey to Grey Towers seemed never-ending. At each bend in the narrow, twisting lane I expected to be greeted by the entrance to the estate, only to have my expectations dashed by another expanse of rolling countryside. High hedges often hid the view, but I could see enough to realize that the land was rich and well cared for. We passed several prosperous farms with men busy in the fields and eventually arrived at a village of small stone houses, where women came to the doors at the sound of horses and children ran beside the carriage.

"Chaunton," said Sir Giles, briefly acknowledging the greetings of the villagers. "We'll come upon the gates about a mile further on."

My heart began to hammer against my tight bodice at the thought of the ordeal ahead, but I hid my emotions and stared out at the tall trees and rich green pasture.

Suddenly the horses slowed and turned in at a pair of high ornate iron gates, and the sun's warmth was abruptly cut off by an avenue of trees, whose thick foliage almost met overhead. Suppressing an involuntary shiver at the change in temperature, I looked over the horses' nodding heads and caught a glimpse of a gray building, the sun sparkling on its window panes.

Wheels crunched over gravel as the carriage was swung round to stop beside an imposing flight of steps. The green coated groom jumped down from beside the coachman and let down the folding steps, but I sat for a moment, gazing almost in awe at the huge house before me. Taller than wide, built of massive stone blocks, its walls slotted with a profusion of narrow windows, it reminded me of the pictures I had seen of castles in Scotland. The far corners were embellished by two square narrowing towers crowned by conical steeples that grew together towards the sky.

Suddenly aware that I was staring, I turned my head and at last accepted the groom's outstretched hand.

Mrs. Medley, the housekeeper, led me to my rooms. I followed her broad back up the wide staircase and along richly carpeted corridors until she flung open a door and stood back for me to enter.

"Mrs.Heath has put you in the blue room, Madam," she said, and entering I saw the reason behind the name.

Blue flowers rioted over the wallpaper, matching velvet curtains hung at the windows; blue silk covered the chairs, while a counterpane of the same color covered the bed. My feet sank into a thick white carpet as I moved forward in delight. What could have been overpowering was somehow light and gay. "What a lovely room!" I exclaimed. "Like a bouquet of larkspurs."

"Yes, Madam," agreed the housekeeper complacently. "Mrs. Heath has a way with color. She chose all the schemes for the rooms when she decorated last year. Mrs. Heath has arranged for one of our girls to attend you. I understand that you aren't bringing your own maid."

"No, only a nursery maid to look after my little boy."

"Then I'll send Mary to unpack for you." She glanced down at the watch pinned to her stout bosom.

"Tea will be served in the sitting room in half an hour, Madam," she said delicately. "The family usually meets there."

"I see," I said, understanding it was expected I would follow suit. "I would like to be sure that Hal has settled in before I join them."

Quite won over, Mrs. Medley relaxed enough to smile and say that if I were worried she would look in on the young gentleman herself. We parted amicably, each satisfied with the other.

Once alone I tossed off my heavy traveling coat, poured water into the basin on the washstand and hastily rinsed my hands and face before tidying my hair. Looking in the mirror I saw the door behind me opening.

A young girl in a maid's-print frock stood timidly in the doorway. Turning around, I smiled encouragingly.

"Do come in, Mary." Seeing her slight hesitation, I repeated the name. "It is Mary, isn't it?"

"My name's Margaret, but Mrs. Medley says all maids are called Mary."

"And what would you prefer to be called?"

"Maggie, if you please, ma'am. It's what my family always calls me."

"Then Maggie it shall be. Now, I'm ready to present myself in the sitting room, if you would show me the way."

Maggie was shocked. "Oh, no, ma'am. I couldn't do that!" she cried. "I'll ask Robert, the footman, to take you."

Following the tall young man in his elegant livery down the stairs, I knew I had committed a gaffe and could only hope Maggie would be kind enough not to regale the other servants with the tale.

It was with trepidation that I entered the sitting room, and the tall elegant woman who turned from the window at my entrance did nothing to relieve my fears.

"Ah, Louise," said my husband's mother, coming forward. "At last we meet." Her cool, dry hand touched mine and she indicated a chair as she seated herself behind a small table bearing china and a silver teapot. "You must forgive me for not making the effort sooner, but after my dear son's death I was almost prostrate. Indeed, I have hardly been able to leave the house."

I accepted an exquisite china cup and looked about at the rose-pink and gold furnishings. "I was admiring my room upstairs," I said, "and Mrs. Medley told me you had chosen all the decorations in the house."

Pale blue eyes regarded me. "Yes, Giles is a dear boy and, realizing the need of something to take my mind away from my sorrow, gave me *carte blanche* in the matter."

"How kind," I murmured, accepting a pastry from the proffered plate.

"Of course, it wore me out, but it pleased dear Giles." Her eyes traveled over my dull green skirt, stopping at the black frogging that fastened the

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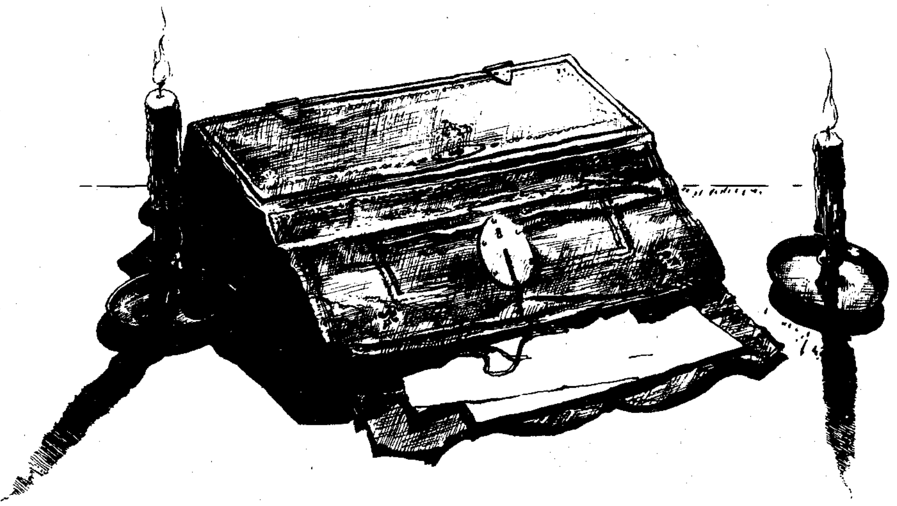
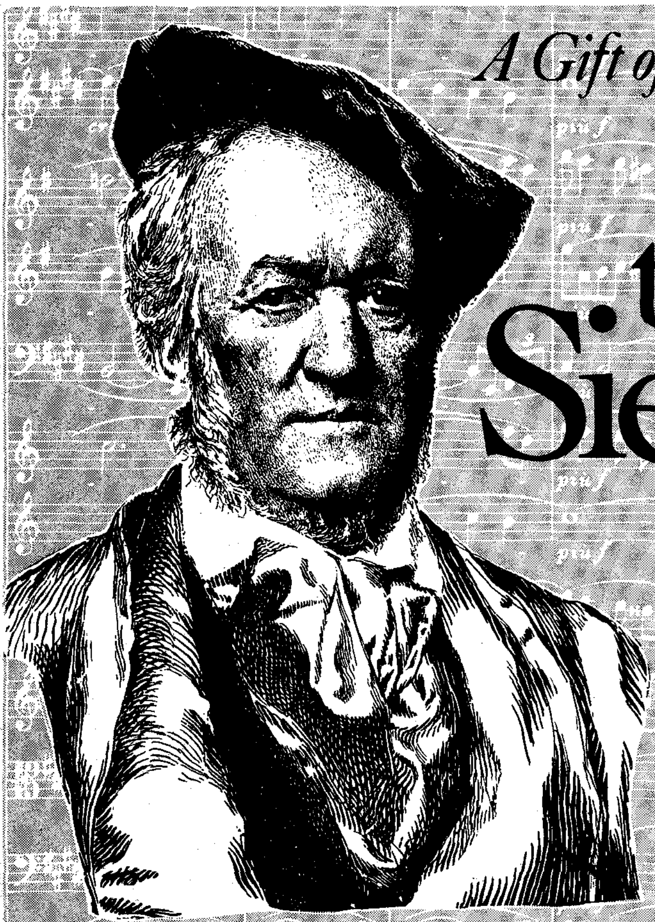


A CAMEO FEATURE

*A Gift of Love*



# the Siegfried Idyll

*Cosima Wagner was married to a genius who demanded everything from her and had nothing to give back—until that magical Christmas morning in 1870*

Arturo Toscanini waited for no one.

He was without question the world's greatest living conductor, and the idea of a Toscanini performance beginning even a moment or two later than scheduled was unthinkable.

Today, however, Toscanini waited in the searing heat of the South German summer—waited patiently for the arrival of the special guest of honor for the afternoon's concert.

Finally, after over an hour's delay, Cosima Wagner, arm-in-arm with her two daughters, stepped out of the shadowy tree-lined path leading up to the outdoor concert platform and quietly took her seat immediately behind the Italian maestro.

Dressed from head to toe in black, nearly blind at the age of ninety, Cosima heard the first strains of the very familiar—and very special music—and was suddenly conscious of the hundreds of pairs of eyes resting their gazes upon her. The brutal heat was having its effects upon the audience, the musicians and the conductor; but not on Cosima, for her mind was rapidly wandering back over seventy years to the memories of a cool and beautiful lakeside house at Tribschen, in Switzerland.

Richard Wagner had come tearing down the staircase at Tribschen, screaming at the top of his lungs. "The fools, the idiots! They've given up!" Cosima, who had become quite used to these outbursts over the past year or two, knew she did not have to ask who had given up what, for her husband would

By Italo Scilone

quickly tell her. And he did: "Those lazy, decrepit Viennese! I write the world's greatest opera on love, I spend ten years sweating blood at my composition desk, ten years writing and perfecting the poem that serves as the text. I finally convince the Royal House of Bavaria to schedule several performances to allow the public to view my astounding work. And now, these stupid Austrians drop *Tristan und Isolde* like a soiled rag after one or two rehearsals!"

Cosima smiled inwardly. The "one or two" rehearsals had actually amounted to quite a few more—fifty-seven in all. Yes, the Viennese had dropped the opera from the season's schedule, claiming it was too difficult, murderously difficult in fact, for them to stage adequately. Besides, the tenor in the Bavarian performances, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, had died shortly after singing the role of Tristan, demonstrating that the vocal parts were too strenuous, not to say dangerous, for any sane performer to consider.

Yet Cosima also knew that her husband Richard spoke the absolute truth when he called this the greatest work on love ever written for the stage. She also knew Richard to be the greatest musical genius the nineteenth century had produced, and that he would someday be regarded with the same adoration and piety now reserved exclusively for Beethoven. Cosima had actually left her husband and come to live with Richard Wagner as proof of this belief, throwing European society into an absolute dither by doing so.

Richard was the son of middle-class Germans from Dresden. Cosima had caused a furious uproar when she had announced her intention to join him in Munich. Cosima was the daughter of Franz Liszt, the most fabulous pianist in memory, and the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult, one of the most celebrated women of France. Liszt had smiled on her marriage to the finest conductor in Europe, Hans von Bülow, and was still quite shaken over her rejection of life with the famous maestro in favor of that with the renegade composer.

"You are mad," Liszt had told her. "Bülow is the perfect match! He is creative, a musical dynamo and eminently successful. You have had two daughters with him, and he is a devoted husband. How in God's name could you possibly desert him in favor of life with an unstable madman-composer who—"

"Who you," Cosima cut him off with vehemence, "thought enough of a genius to take his opera *Lohengrin* and personally direct and conduct its first performance at Weimar!"

"You are speaking ancient history," Liszt retorted. "That was in 1848, twenty years ago, when he was a wanted man in Germany for participating in the Dresden uprising. He was—he was a criminal!"

"But you conducted *Lohengrin* nonetheless," Cosima screamed.

"That was different. You are speaking of a great work of art which—"

"No, Papa. I am speaking—*we* are speaking of a great artist. Richard Wagner is the greatest artistic genius of our time, and I choose to make my life with him—just as Mother chose to make her life with you." There, she had said it, without the slightest regret.

Franz Liszt stood frozen with indecision. He knew very well that Marie d'Agoult had simply walked away from Paris to join him on tour in Switzerland, causing a violent scandal throughout France. He decided to calm down and play his trump card.

"Wagner is a married man, Cosima," Liszt pleaded, in a steady voice. "His wife Minna sits in Dresden, abandoned, without—"

This was too much for Cosima. "His wife Minna is a shrew—a selfish, avaricious hag who has no conception of her husband's greatness, and who has not given him the one thing he longs for most in life: a son."

Liszt stared at his daughter in dismay. "And you—?"

"And I shall give him the love, the regard, *and* the child he so richly deserves." With that, Cosima turned her back on her father and stormed from the room. Two days later, her two daughters beside her, she was on her way to join the man to whom she would dedicate the rest of her life.

Two years after that train ride, Cosima sat in the villa at Tribschen, staring out the window at the calm waters of Lake Lucerne below. Her husband, Bülow, was in the room downstairs with Richard. To the surprise of everyone but Cosima and Richard, Bülow had stepped aside in favor of Richard without so much as a peep, and was now in the process of arranging for the divorce—an arduous process involving the governments and legal machinery of Switzerland, Germany and Bavaria.

The previous spring, in early June of 1869, Cosima had given birth to the son Richard had so desperately longed for.

"We shall name him Siegfried," Richard had shouted with exultation. "Yes, Siegfried, after the greatest hero of Nordic myth. Siegfried, after the hero of my opera!"

Cosima had been, along with Richard, overjoyed. Still living together in a state of legal—and unmarried—limbo, the birth of the child would finally bring Richard down out of his artistic cloud-and-fantasy kingdom to exist on earth with his beloved family.

Now Cosima cringed slightly with that special inner pain that occurs when remembering things that might have been, that *should* have been, but were not. After an initial period of closeness with Cosima and the child, Richard had returned to his work.

He had returned to composing, writing and designing the ideal operas for some imaginary ideal theater that she was sure would never exist. The daughter of Franz Liszt had sat for hours listening to Richard Wagner pontify about the state of German Art, the music of the future; had sat and listened to him yowl out all the roles of the opera he had been working on; had watched him, without the slightest show of amusement, wreak havoc with the keys of the piano in the manner reserved for non-pianist composers.

Aside from these demonstrations of uncurable egotism, Wagner had not in any way treated Cosima as anything but another woman necessary to the cause of his artistic creation. He needed companionship, he needed a son, he needed adoration. Cosima had fulfilled, as far as she knew, these needs.

Richard accepted her gifts without question, as though they were owed to him, and she had become subservient to his creative needs.

Enough, thought Cosima, and she rang for her maid. "My wraps, please. I wish to take a stroll around the lake before supper."

## WHEN WE MET

*by L. Milton Hankins*

*The hint of love-mist in our eyes—*
*My whispered hello,*
*Your perfumed sighs,*
*The fleeting moments when we met*
*Linger with us, Love*
*And yet,*
*Though fonder moments still we dare*
*Those first remain the best we share.*

"But Madame, it is mid-December—" the servant began.

"A very mild mid-December at that, is it not?" Cosima interjected, and watched the girl remove the hooded cloak from the large rosewood wardrobe.

The scent of evergreens was heavy along the shore of the lake that afternoon. Cosima walked quietly around the head-high clumps of young Norwegian spruce trees, careful not to catch the hem of her cloak on the jagged branches and cones beneath her feet.

"BRR-a-a-a-at!"

The sound had come out of nowhere, and with such vehemence that Cosima's hands had instinctively flown to her breast and throat in shock. A stray goat, perhaps, caught in the bramble patch?

"BR-a-a-a-at!" No! The unearthly noise came from the clump of pines at the lake's edge, just off to the left. Cosima, summoning all of the courage of the Liszt-d'Agoult blood within her, stealthily paced toward the source of the horrible sound.

And again, even louder, "BRA-A-A-A-AT!"

She swept aside the branches to discover, seated on the ground like some Indian of the American West, the famous conductor Hans Richter, his face beet-red and a trumpet in his lap.

"Good God, Hans! What on earth are you doing?"

Poor Richter looked as if he were a small child caught in the act of stealing a freshly-baked ginger cookie from the cook's tray. "Practicing, Frau Cosima," he said, dejectedly.

"But you are a violinist, and a great one at that. To see you blowing your brains out with that metal toy is just—"

"I beg your pardon Frau Cosima, but have you the time?"

Cosima, quite taken aback by the musician's behavior, reached into her deep cloak pocket and brought out a watch. "It is nearly four o'clock."

"Four o'clock? That late! I must be off to Zurich for rehearsal."

"On the trumpet? There is no large orchestra in Zurich."

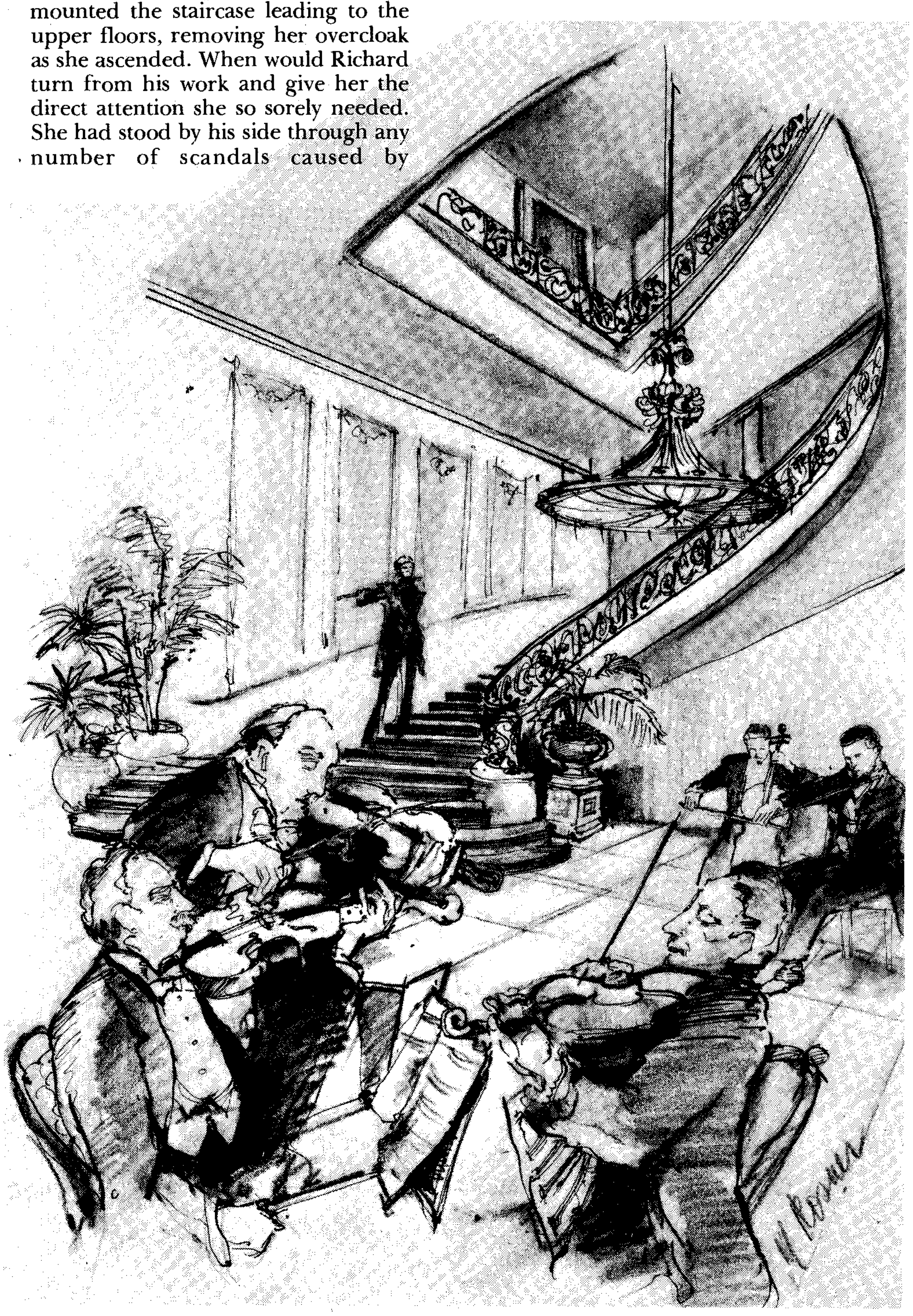
"Well, er, yes, yes, well, it *is* late, isn't it?" Richter replied, and before Cosima could say another word he was off into the woods running toward the villa at breakneck speed, leaving Cosima in a state of total surprise and stupefaction.

Back at the Villa, Cosima recounted the incident to Richard, who brushed the incident aside. "The divorce decrees have been issued," he shouted. "We can marry!" And with that, he continued talking about his latest opera, his latest poetry, his latest thoughts on politics.

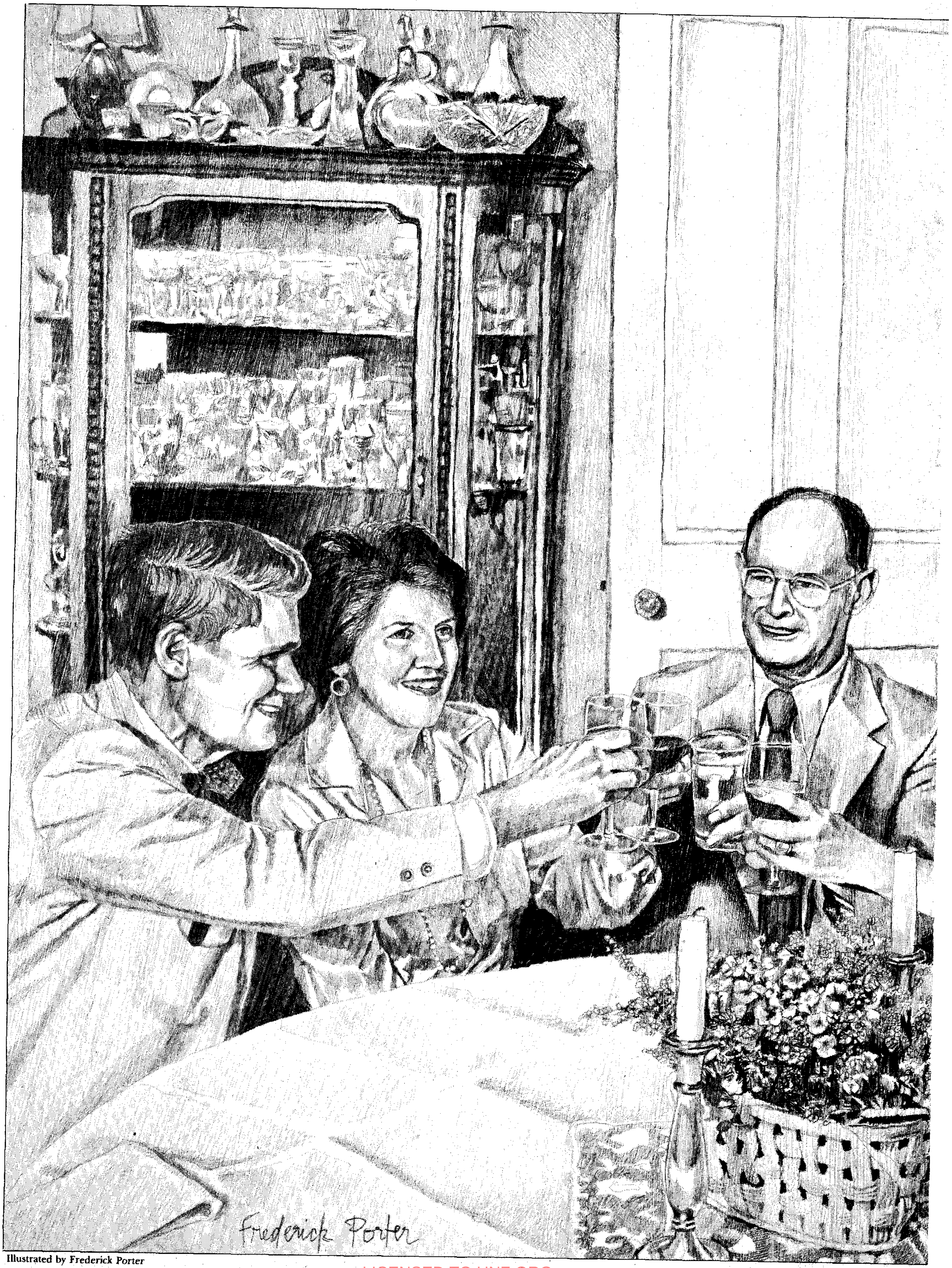
Cosima wearily turned and walked to the fireplace to warm herself and remove the December chill from her bones. Reminding Richard that it was nearly time for supper, she turned and mounted the staircase leading to the upper floors, removing her overcloak as she ascended. When would Richard turn from his work and give her the direct attention she so sorely needed. She had stood by his side through any number of scandals caused by Wagner's voicing his views on everything from vegetarianism to the killing of animals for experimental purposes. She, Cosima, the daughter of Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult, the wife—no the former wife—of the greatest conductor alive, had completely dedicated her life to a musical genius who was apparently self-serving and unfeeling.

The sound of children's singing broke her train of thought and she

*(Continued on page 94)*



Illustrated by Meryl Rosner



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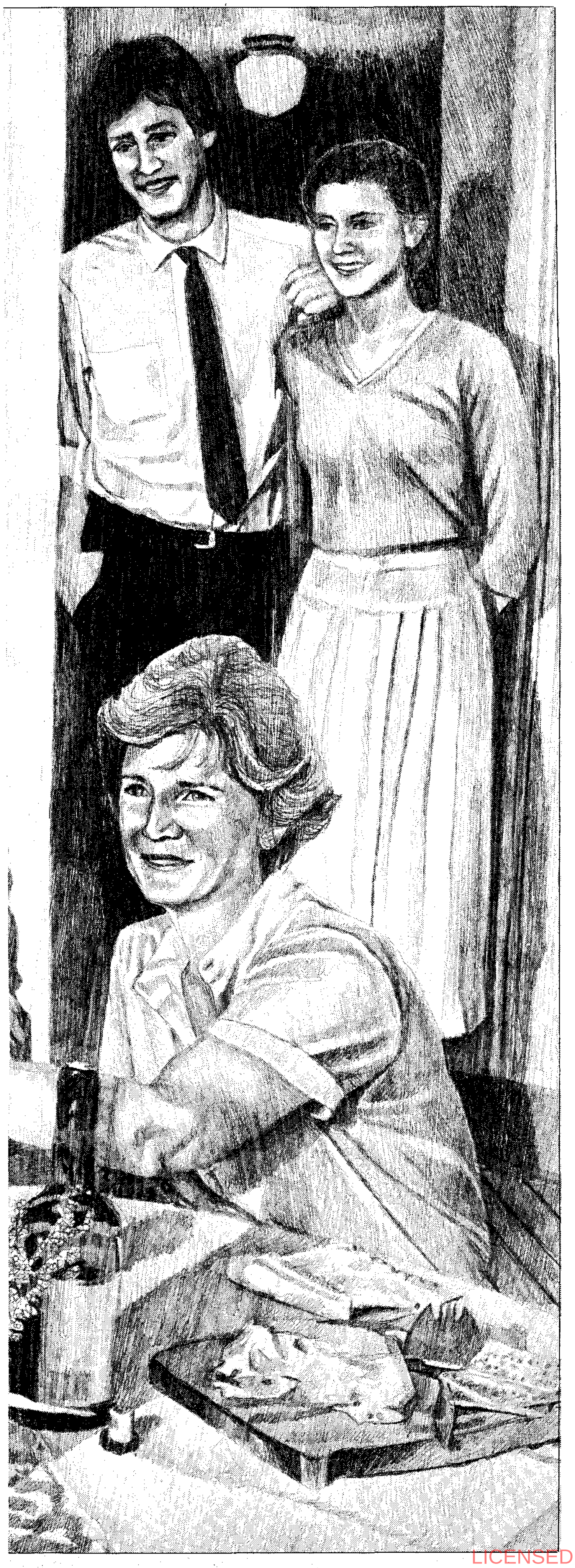


# parents' evening

*Should he call the Fire Brigade? He certainly couldn't leave his bride-to-be behind the kitchen door when everyone else was on the other side*

Nervously, Pete looked at Susie. A lock of hair had fallen over one eye, her lips were compressed, and, as she hopped from one counter to another in the tiny kitchen, she seemed thoroughly distracted.

"Susie, where do you keep the corkscrew?" Pete asked tentatively, partly because he needed to know and partly to keep her mind off the encounter ahead.

"The corkscrew is kept—and always has been kept—in the second drawer of the cabinet next to the sink," Susie answered in a voice taut with tension.

"Well, how would I know that? It's your apartment, my girl. I'm still only a visitor, remember."

"Oh, Pete, you know as well as I do where everything's kept in the kitchen, and if you don't you certainly ought to by now. After all, the wedding's only two months off—Oh, brother!" Susan had dropped a just-unwrapped stick of butter on the kitchen floor. She stood for a moment looking down at it, and then suddenly burst into tears. Pete stared at her. He had never seen her so irritable and nervous.

"Why don't we sit down for five minutes, Susie, and open that bottle of sherry," he suggested placatingly. "There's still lots of time."

"There isn't—I've still got the onions to chop and the lettuce to wash and—" Still protesting, she found herself propelled firmly into the other room, pushed into a chair. Seconds later, there was a glass of sherry in her hand.

"Here's to a happy meeting," said Pete with a wry smile.

"Oh, why can't we just go and get married, and tell them later? Why go through all this? It's so pointless.

### A short story by Ann Lovell

They'll have years and years to get to know each other. It's ridiculous to go to all this trouble when we know they're going to loathe each other anyway. They have absolutely nothing in common except us. And your parents are going to look at my mother and think to themselves, 'That's what Susan is going to be like when she's older. Poor Peter.'"

"There's nothing wrong with your mother." He said it stoutly enough, but his voice rang hollow in his own ears. Even his love-dazzled eyes could see that Susie's mother was a lady of somewhat formidable spirit.

"And my father's sure to get on his high horse and argue with yours about politics and then he'll lose his temper, because he never can argue without losing his temper," Susan swept on. "It's going to be perfectly ghastly, and I wish I were in Timbuktu. What's more, it was all your idea."

"But I just thought that it would be easier—well—more civilized for them to meet this way over a meal. Even if they do detest your parents, once they taste your cooking, my parents will understand why I have this irresistible urge to marry you, though I'm sure they see all the other reasons for my choice."

"*Your* choice!" She glared at him over her sherry glass. "Any choosing that was done was absolutely reciprocal. You sound like something out of the last century. And that word 'civilized' you bandy around so airily—it's—it's anything but that. I think it was a rotten idea and I wish to heaven I'd never agreed to it."

"Susie, for goodness sake, calm down. You're blowing this all out of proportion. It doesn't matter that much. They don't matter that much. What matters is us. And I hate seeing you so upset." He took her hand to prove his point, but she refused to let him keep it. She was in no mood for male logic.

"They do matter—that's just the trouble. They're going to play a part in our lives whether we want them to or not."

"But my parents like you—it's quite obvious they do." Pete's patience was beginning to wear thin. He knew women could be unreasonable, but apparently he hadn't realized the extent of it. "Isn't that enough? Surely they don't have to fall in love with your family as well as you. It would be asking a bit much."

"There's no need to be sarcastic. You know as well as I do just how they're going to look down their noses at Mom and Dad."

"What does it matter if they do?"

He lost his temper at last. He had never known her to be like this and didn't know what to do. He had wanted everything to be completely serene, and things were in a total uproar. It was true that the parental supper party in Susie's apartment had been his idea. Susie was a marvelous cook, and he had this feeling that good food and wine would smooth away any ruffles in advance and set the pattern for the whole future relationship. Pete was a great believer in lubricating the wheels.

But now Susie was on a rampage that would ruin everything with her jumpiness and her positively morbid desire to see hurt where none was intended. In answer to his display of temper, she put her sherry glass down with a bang that broke the stem and marched furiously into the kitchen, slamming the door hard behind her.

Sighing, Pete bent down to pick up the pieces. She was, of course, right; the evening was going to be far more difficult than he had thought. But the difficulty would not be caused by him, or by their parents.

The doorbell rang. Swearing inwardly at his parents' inevitable, formal punctuality which insured that they arrived at an engagement five minutes early, he turned to go and open the front door. He paused as the handle of the kitchen door rattled loudly.

"Pete, what d'you think you're doing? Let me out!" Susie's voice, though muffled, was still distinctly furious.

"I'm not shutting you in."

"What? But I can't open the door! *Do* something, can't you?"

He tried the handle, but it turned uselessly. Susie's slam had obviously broken the latch, or dislodged a screw —or something. Pete never had been much of a home handyman and knew nothing whatsoever about handles or locks. He rattled and tugged in mounting panic, but nothing happened. The doorbell rang again.

"Where do you keep your tools?"

"Here in the kitchen, of course."

"Look, love—hang on. I'll just let my parents in, or they'll think they've come on the wrong day. Luckily the sherry's in here."

An indignant snort was the only answer. He couldn't help grinning as he went to open the front door. This was going to take a little explaining.

Hello Mom, hello Dad—come in, come in. I'm being butler as Susie's in the kitchen and I can't get her out."

They didn't, of course, take him literally, and tried hard not to show surprise at not being welcomed by their hostess and future daughter-in-law. He hastened to enlighten them.

"No, I mean it. She—er—shut the door rather hard, and a spring or something seems to have snapped in the catch. I can't get her out. In any case, the tools are on her side. Have some sherry while I try and think of what to do."

The sherry glasses were still in the kitchen, so he borrowed some wine glasses from Susie's immaculately laid table, and filled them to the brim. Getting Susie out might take a long time, and their dinner was, after all, in the kitchen along with Susie.

"Pete?" His fiancée's voice through the door was already beginning to sound less incensed and more plaintive.

"Yes?"

"Have you explained?"

"Yes, of course. Have you got that screwdriver?"

"I can't find it."

Pete's brain refused to react. No idea at all offered itself.

"Pete?"

"Hello there!"

"What shall I do?" This time the voice wobbled a little. Tears were clearly threatening again.

"I'm just trying to think, love—don't worry." So he was, but the operation was taking place in unchartered territory, which seemed to bear a resemblance to the Sahara. His father coughed discreetly behind him.

"Suppose we try with a knife, son?"

A knife? Yes, of course,—that was the answer. Of course. He seized one from the table and started levering it into the door catch. He worked away patiently for some minutes. Nothing happened. Then the blade broke.

He looked at the broken bit in disbelief, then at his father, who merely scratched his head and took a large swig of sherry. He wasn't much of a handyman, either. At that moment, the front doorbell rang again.

"Oh, Lord—that'll be Susie's parents." He wasn't grinning this time as he went to answer. The situation was threatening to get out of control.

"Hello, hello. Do come in," he greeted them with a great show of heartiness that he was far from feeling. "Meet my parents. Susie's in the kitchen. Actually,er—we're in a spot of trouble because we can't get her out."

Susie's mother turned large, penetrating blue eyes on him, and his heart quailed.

"Can't get her out?"

Pete's mother, who was small and dark, rushed to the defense of her son.

"The door handle's broken. And now the knife's broken, too," she explained in a voice already slightly blurred by sherry.

"The knife?" The pinpoints seemed to be giving off sparks. Would nothing allay the woman's suspicions?

"We were trying to lever the catch open with it." This time it was Pete's father who stepped into the firing line beside his son. "Only it's no go—blade's not strong enough. Here, have some sherry; helps the think tank or whatever the youngsters call it nowadays."

He imitated his son in the generosity of the measure he poured. Susie's mother's expression softened. Whatever had happened, it was obviously not a case of assault and battery. They all stood and drank thoughtfully, almost companionably, Pete thought.

A muffled sound came from the other side of the kitchen door. They listened. Susie was unmistakably crying. Pete looked around desperately for support. Was it, he wondered, a case for the fire department? There was no other door to the kitchen and the apartment was on the second floor.

"Susie—darling—don't cry. It's me, Mother. Crying won't help. Now dry your eyes and think. Haven't you got a screwdriver?"

"If I had, there wouldn't be any problem, would there? I've lost it. Oh, Mom—the meal's going to be ruined. What can I do?"

Susie's mother took a gulp of sherry by way of answer and looked hopefully around at the others.

"We could always break the door down," offered her husband. "At least, you others could—my sciatica puts me out of the picture, I'm afraid."

No one looked very enthusiastic.

"What about phoning a locksmith?" suggested Pete's mother.

"At eight o'clock on a Saturday night? You must be joking," her husband said witheringly. "You must think they work after hours, unlike the rest of the world."

"Wait a minute. I have an idea." It was Susie's mother who spoke. "I once saw something on the TV about breaking into a house. I need some wire." She turned to Pete's mother. "A hairpin—do you happen to have a hairpin? I imagine there must be one somewhere in all those lovely coils of hair."

Pete's mother smiled, visibly flattered, and withdrew a couple of strong pins from her elaborately dressed hair. A long braid promptly fell from its position and hung over her shoulder, making her look rather like a schoolgirl. "Oh well," she said cheerfully, squinting down at it, "all in a good cause. Could I please have some more sherry, Pete?"

With an expression of concentrated gravity, Susie's mother bent over the recalcitrant lock. The men watched her, fascinated partly by her resourcefulness and partly by the view her position afforded of a, considering her years, still extremely shapely figure. Pete saw the expression in his father's eyes and very nearly chuckled aloud.

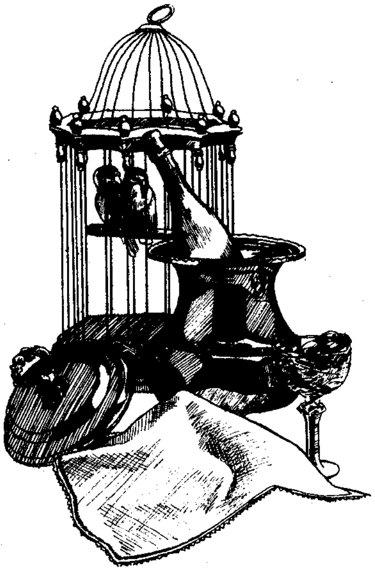
Suddenly there was a click, and the door swung open to reveal a distraught, wild-eyed Susie, who rushed hysterically into her mother's arms.

"There now, there now—calm down. It's all right now. You're out. Here, Peter, give her some sherry. Now, sit down, darling, and relax. All's well that ends well. But tell me—how on earth did it happen?"

Susie looked at Pete, and Pete looked at Susie. For a moment there was silence, then they both began to giggle. Soon they were helpless with laughter.

"Shall we tell them?" Pete was wiping his streaming eyes.

Susie nodded. "We were having a fight," she gasped, "and I—slammed the door on him. And the handle—just broke."



The four parents stared. Then Pete's father's shoulders began to shake, and presently to heave. Suppressed chuckles from the women broke out into open peals of laughter.

"Would it—would it be indelicate to inquire what the row was about?" asked Susie's mother as soon as she had recovered her breath.

Susie looked at Pete, and Pete looked at Susie. Pete nodded.

"Go on—tell them."

Susie turned bright pink and looked around nervously. But as she looked at them all sitting there—Pete's mother with her braid still hanging over her shoulder, her cheeks flushed and her nose shining, and her own mother, bright-eyed and very much conscious of having saved the situation, and the two fathers happily putting away the sherry—her nervousness suddenly vanished. She smiled.

"I was terrified that you wouldn't get along, and—well,—I suppose I was a bit uptight. I bit Pete's head off. I couldn't think how to make the evening a success, and he couldn't see what was the matter with me. He thought I was being stupid. I lost my temper. And very nearly spent the night in the kitchen as a result."

"Oh poor darling!" It was Pete's mother who spoke. She turned to her husband. "Do you know—I can remember feeling exactly like that when our parents met for the first time. Only I wasn't lucky enough to get myself locked in the kitchen. I spent the entire evening suffering. Every time my parents opened their mouths, I knew they were going to say the wrong thing. And they did. I've never forgotten it. The ridiculous thing is that in later years they came to be great friends, and I was scarred for life all over nothing."

"Ours never met till the wedding," Susie's mother sighed, her eyes nostalgic. "And do you know, I think that was even worse. They stood there at the reception inspecting each other, and us. My new mother-in-law stared at me so much I thought my seams had split. They'd been living abroad and only flew back in time for the ceremony, so I didn't know her at all. She turned out to be an absolute darling on better acquaintance. Years later, she told me she had been absolutely terrified of meeting me. You can't really win in this kind of situation, I suppose. You create your own agony. Part of being young— "

"—is thinking the whole world is tied up in your knots," finished her husband. "You never stop to wonder

*(Continued on page 95)*

# Where Have I Been Until Now?

*She was restless and wanted to change — her life, her looks. But would he rather have the person she left behind?*

The metamorphosis of Angela Forsyth began at midday one Monday, as she sat under the dryer and read the magazine article slowly and with fierce concentration. The article was an in-depth piece of advice on living. It was entitled "The Hidden You," and had startling pictures of before and after. Large, cardigan-clad ladies were transformed into svelte, bikinied beauties, and there were revealing thumbnail portraits of incredible achievements once the initial moment of self-assessment had been passed.

There was a picture of the Manor Park Health and Beauty Farm, the seat of this miracle-working, complete with rolling downs and dark green foliage. The stately house itself was attached to tennis courts, a covered pool and stables.

Angela did a quick reckoning of the cost for one week and paled as she realized it was twice as much as last year's two week holiday in Sardinia.

She was glad when Paul, the stylist, came to rescue her from the heat of the dryer. Angela watched him as he brushed and styled her hair. She regarded the smooth fringe, the slight side flicks, and reflected on the ordinary quality of her style. It had been the same basic shape and color and length for as long as she could remember. It seemed to be another nail in her coffin of discontent, and she asked the receptionist if she could take the magazine with her.

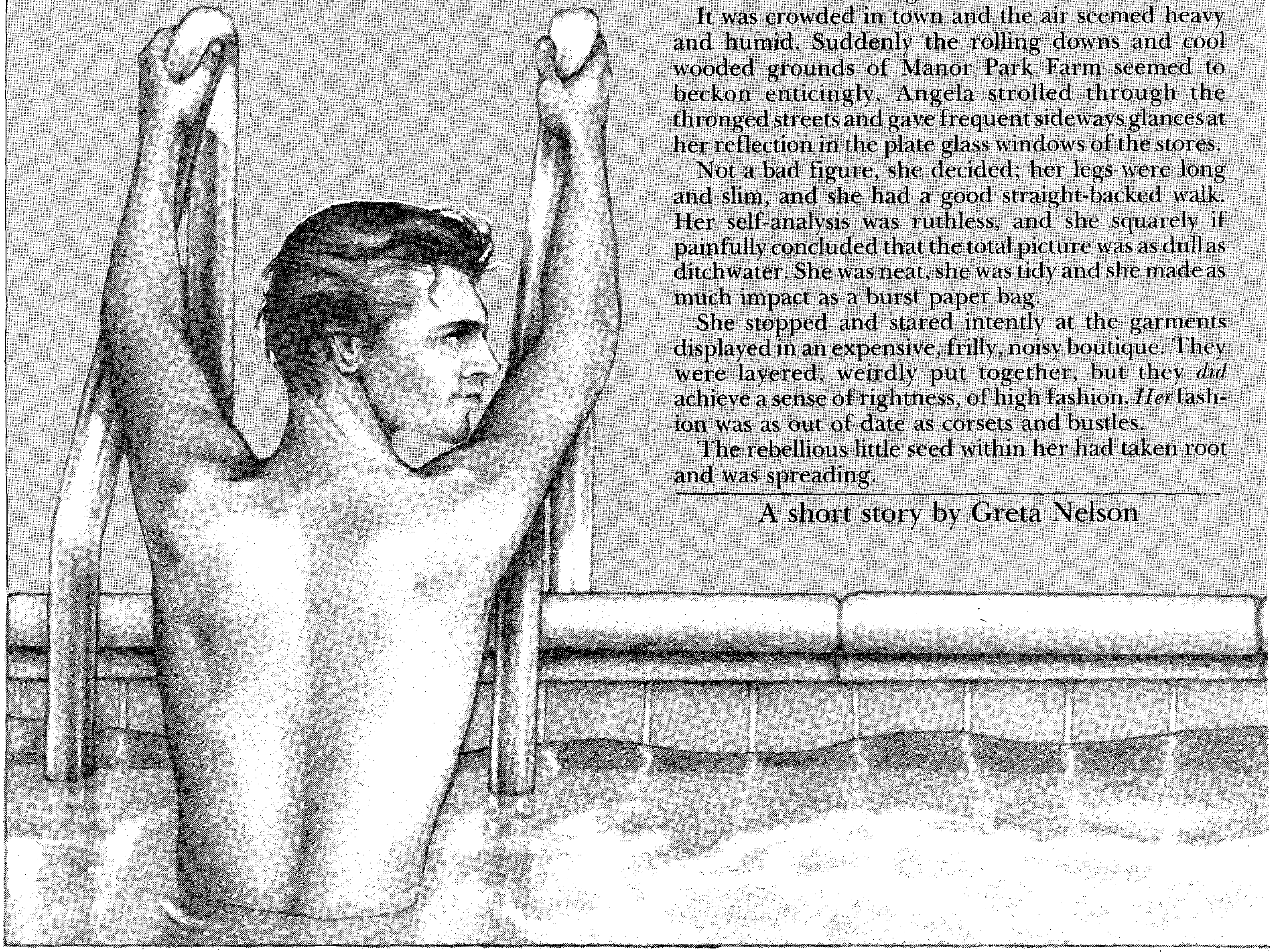
It was crowded in town and the air seemed heavy and humid. Suddenly the rolling downs and cool wooded grounds of Manor Park Farm seemed to beckon enticingly. Angela strolled through the thronged streets and gave frequent sideways glances at her reflection in the plate glass windows of the stores.

Not a bad figure, she decided; her legs were long and slim, and she had a good straight-backed walk. Her self-analysis was ruthless, and she squarely if painfully concluded that the total picture was as dull as ditchwater. She was neat, she was tidy and she made as much impact as a burst paper bag.

She stopped and stared intently at the garments displayed in an expensive, frilly, noisy boutique. They were layered, weirdly put together, but they *did* achieve a sense of rightness, of high fashion. *Her* fashion was as out of date as corsets and bustles.

The rebellious little seed within her had taken root and was spreading.

### A short story by Greta Nelson



Illustrated by Terrance Rogers

She slipped into a nearby bistro, ordered coffee and sat in a dark, solitary corner. She reflected that her present climate of discontent was not born of hairstyles and clothes alone. It was something more basic, a dissatisfaction with life, *her* life, a recognition that she was as undirected as a ship without a compass.

She was twenty-nine, with loved and loving parents tucked away in Devon. She had a good, satisfying job with a publishing firm, and she had a pleasant, comfortable apartment overlooking a London park. And she was almost engaged to Kenneth Jardine, who did clever financial things in the City, wore expensive silk shirts, and stayed during the week in a luxury bachelor pad, going home to Mother on Saturdays and Sundays.

It wasn't by any means the archetypal mother-son problem. Mrs. Jardine was too self-contained, too successful herself to rein in her son on any apron strings (were she likely ever to wear such a thing). But Kenneth's opinion of his mother was so high, so sacrosanct that Angela sometimes wondered if anyone could ever fill his requirements for a wife.

If he'd been a womanizer, it might have helped. She would have enjoyed an occasional slinging match because of some errant misdemeanor on Kenneth's part. But he was loyal, he was courteous, and his intentions were strictly honorable. He talked of the time when they would be "under one roof," and one brilliantly sunny Saturday, he had invited Angela to go with him to Hargreaves, one of the smartest jewelers in town. Angela saw at least a dozen rings she'd have been very happy to wear, but as looking seemed to be the only order of the day, she stifled any undue excitement.

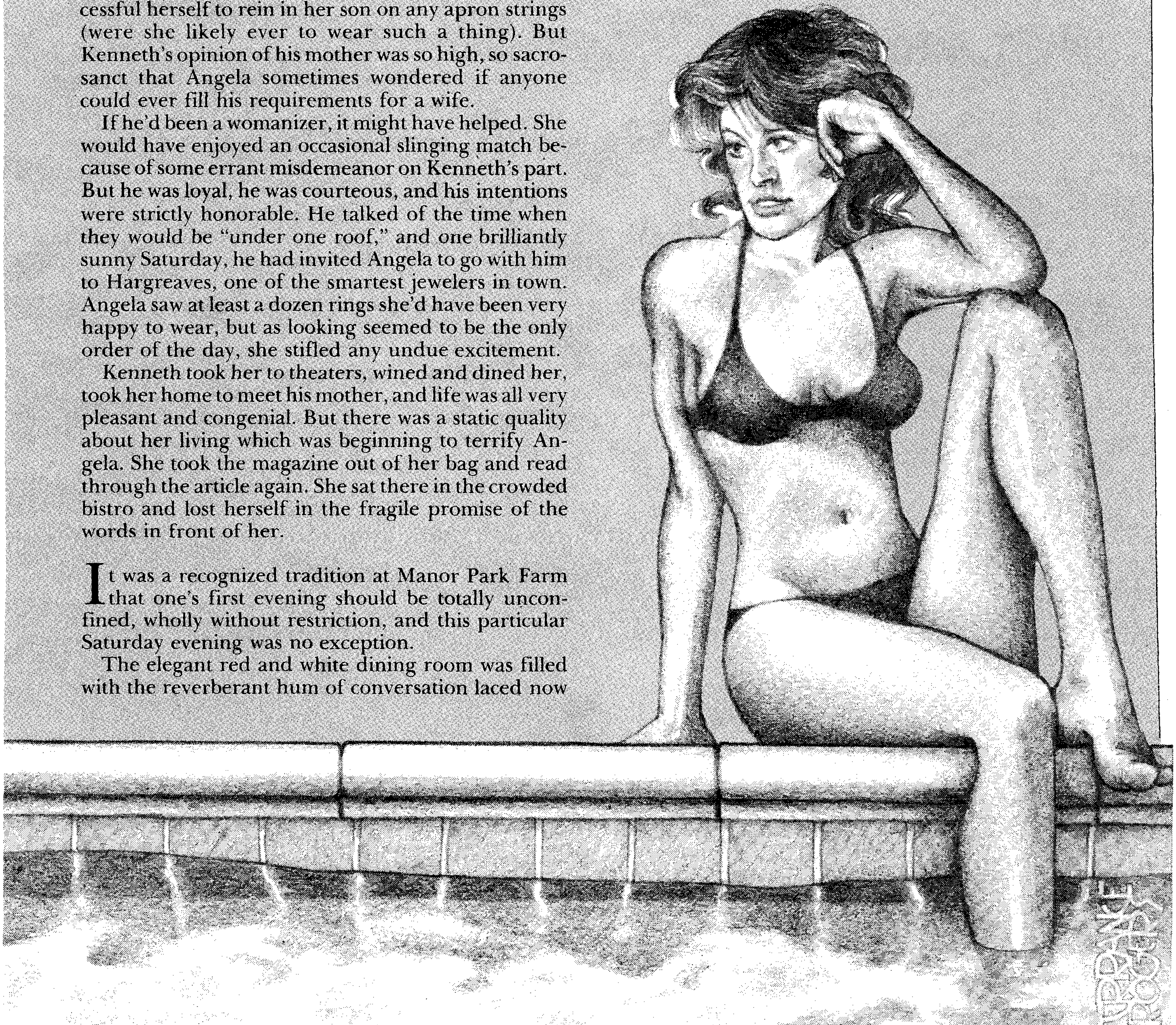
Kenneth took her to theaters, wined and dined her, took her home to meet his mother, and life was all very pleasant and congenial. But there was a static quality about her living which was beginning to terrify Angela. She took the magazine out of her bag and read through the article again. She sat there in the crowded bistro and lost herself in the fragile promise of the words in front of her.

It was a recognized tradition at Manor Park Farm that one's first evening should be totally unconfined, wholly without restriction, and this particular Saturday evening was no exception.

The elegant red and white dining room was filled with the reverberant hum of conversation laced now and then with a liberal scraping of cutlery on china or the chink of glasses being refilled. There seemed to be an almost paranoid interest in the delicious cuisine, and every last morsel of salmon mousse, creamed ham cornets, and generous helpings of profiteroles in chocolate sauce was demolished and savored by the slightly anxious guests, nervous at what tomorrow might—or might not—bring.

Angela Forsyth found that she was enjoying herself enormously—there was a preholiday gaiety about the place, and the guests had already fallen into that easy anonymity that goes with a shared interest.

After dinner they all drifted into the lounge, a vast room full of thick-pile velvet settees and floor-to-ceiling silk curtains. Angela found herself next to the large,



suntanned American lady, awash with diamonds.

"My dear," she said, placing a ring-laden hand on Angela's arm, "I thought at first that you must be one of the staff; you're delightfully slim. Now tell me just why you feel you need this place. Isn't it simply wonderful, by the way? All that English countryside, just like having one's own parkland. I always feel I have truly British roots, you know."

She leaned nearer to Angela. "Are you scared about tomorrow? I am. Truly I am. I have a real fear of going hungry." The blue eyes closed momentarily. "I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for dear Gregory. He's my fiancé, my two dear husbands having already gone before me. Gregory is so good-looking, my dear. He's a fine athlete and plays squash and tennis, and he's just so fit and lean, and, well, just *look* at me."

Angela looked and saw the terror behind the suntan and the diamonds. She smiled and said that she was sure tomorrow would be just fine, although she privately thought unmentionable things about the super-fit Gregory.

As she lay between the cool satin sheets in her first-floor luxury bedroom, she wondered if Kenneth had stopped sulking. One would think she had decided to spend a week on the moon. His face had betrayed an all too transparent look of disbelief and scorn.

"You *can't* be!" he'd said, a sort of amused irritation in his smooth voice. "You can't seriously be laying yourself open to a week of physical torture and lettuce leaves, *and* paying through the nose at that!"

His total lack of understanding, his supreme confidence, was the last spur she needed. She had looked at this man who had occupied so much of her life during the last two years, looked at the sizable shoulders, the rather sexy mouth, and she knew that Manor Park Health and Beauty Farm was now as inevitable as day and night.

By Wednesday, which was Angela's fourth day, she marveled at the total adaptability of the human race. This week's chance collection of guests had come together like a closely knit family unit.

Angela had already become the golden girl. She had slipped into the routine like a fish entering its own familiar pool. She had responded to every treatment with an effortless ease that astounded the hosts and fellow guests alike. And she glowed with enthusiasm. She took pleasure in observing her smooth deep tan, her new, carefree hairstyle bubbling like a froth of champagne, and she approved of her new streamlined waist and hips.

But her chief pleasure was in recognizing how much her confidence had increased, helping her to make her own personal contribution to this strange new experience.

Somehow she seemed to have become the unwritten Solomon, the Listener, the Farm's unofficial agony specialist. She had become an expert on Gregory by the second day, and she tried as gently and as subtly as she could to reproportion Aimée Van Druyten's emotional life. (She was not displeased to see that Aimée was becoming most friendly with the sweet little grocer from Milan.)

She'd sat until the early hours giving stern, commonsense advice to the beautiful blonde Gemma, who had come to forget the Latin lover she'd met a month ago. And Angela smiled with satisfaction as she observed the promising relationship between Gemma and the young redheaded gym instructor.

Only one person seemed to be set apart, aloof, almost patronizing, watching the efforts of the less active patrons with an air of cool detachment.

His name was Jefferson C. Browne, and he was an all-out American from the tip of his suede chukka boots to the top of his dark, graying hair. Rumor had it that heart trouble was the reason for him being at Manor Park, but as yet Angela had seen no such sign. He rode, he walked, he exercised, and his tall, erect frame was without an ounce of flab.

Angela privately nicknamed him the General, and imagined him commanding whole troops of tough GIs, his decisions ruthless and unswerving, his brain as sharp as a surgeon's knife.

She was right about his brain, as it happened. But she was wrong about the rest.

Jefferson C. Browne was a man of gentleness, with a bottomless, warm-hearted regard for his fellow men. He had never married (having lost a teenage rivalry to a close friend and subsequently opting out of any further disappointments), but he was an essential part of the Browne clan which spread over the greater part of Virginia. Nephews and nieces doted on him; brothers and sisters relied on him for advice of all kinds; and to friends and family alike, he was their rock, their refuge.

Only in the eventual privacy of his luxury penthouse suite did he allow his true loneliness to reveal itself, somehow causing the material achievements of his real estate business to appear unimportant. And he always welcomed tomorrow as a chance to plunge yet again into his nonstop routine of work.

His coronary the previous year, at the age of forty, had brought him up sharply, and he had spent a long month in a sanatorium. Aware of how close he had come to being plucked from life, life had become sweet.

He suddenly felt the need for something totally new, and he took a long vacation, choosing to travel through Europe until he felt he was well on the way to total recovery.

It was during his week in London that he spotted the advertisement for Manor Park Farm. The States were abounding in such establishments, and at first Jefferson C. Browne viewed it with amused interest. But the pictorial enticement was very persuasive. What the heck, he thought.

At first, it was worse than he could have imagined. He loathed the intimacy, the cozy family atmosphere. He immediately became adroit at avoiding Aimée Van Druyten and her monologues on the odious Gregory, and he seriously thought of canceling the rest of his stay.

Then he noticed the English rose (as he thought of her), the Forsyth girl. He liked the smooth brown hair, as shiny as a bird's wing, her eyes, gray and startled, as though she was never sure what was around the corner. He found her natural concern for people around her quite enchanting. She was as selfless as most of them were selfish.

He had watched as she gradually changed her image. He saw her sporting new, stylish clothes, a brief, daring bikini, and the startling hairstyle. And he sighed. He felt that he had just found something special and it was being erased before his eyes. He wondered if he ought to shorten his week anyway and thought he would make his decision over his morning dip in the pool.

In her room that morning, Angela Forsyth appraised herself in the full-length mirror. The bikini suited her, there was no doubt about it. Its simple black lines made her tan look deeper, and she hadn't been in such good shape since her teens. She realized she was

*(Continued on page 95)*

◆

*Love conquers all; let us too yield to Love.*

Vergil
Eclogues

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

# the Enchantment of Merrowporth

Illustrated by Franco Accornero

### BY JEAN SAUNDERS

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

# the Enchantment of Merrowporth

She read the advertisement in the high society magazine for the tenth time. When she first saw the ad it intrigued her so much, she sneaked it out of the dentist's.

She tapped one long, tapering forefinger against the glossy page, a slight frown clouding her smooth, wide brow and hazel eyes.

"Excellent prospects offered to well-educated young lady with a love of the country and rural pursuits," she read out loud in the silence of her apartment. "The successful applicant will be in her mid-twenties, dark-haired, and of attractive appearance. She will enjoy traveling and will have no ties or dependents. I am not looking for a homeless waif, but for a capable young lady with a lively mind who can converse on a variety of topics. If you think you qualify, apply by telephone to Mr. John Gable, Solicitor."

A telephone number followed, and the address was Truro, Cornwall.

"Phew!" Corinne tried to picture the man who had worded the paragraph so succinctly, at the same time giving absolutely nothing away about himself or his type of business. John Gable, whoever he was, certainly had definite ideas about what he wanted in an assistant or secretary or housekeeper, her mind raced on. But the nature of the work involved must be intriguing.

And she was capable, wasn't she? No ties, no dependents . . . well, until a month ago, she certainly wouldn't have admitted the first. Whenever she thought about Harvey Newsome it made her heart give an unpleasant little lurch. She had fully expected him to propose marriage in due course, but he had decided that the daughter of a company director had more to offer an ambitious rising young executive in Daddy's firm than a temporary secretary who preferred short-term posts. It hurt then and it still hurt now, though sometimes Corinne wondered if it was her pride that smarted as much as her feelings. Perhaps she was even sneakily relieved that she hadn't, after all, got herself engaged to Harvey, who was a bit of a ladies' man, and she didn't altogether envy the daughter of the company director if her husband's eye was going to start roving as soon as the ceremony was over. She was probably far better off still being single and fancy-free.

Even though Aunt Jessie looked down her elegant nose and said that in her day a young woman of twenty-five would be considered on the shelf. Her brows puckered again, thinking of Aunt Jessie. No dependents, the ad stated specifically. Admittedly the spirited, white-haired old lady who practically ran the small village where she lived, single-handed, would be outraged to think her great-niece had labeled her with such a downright geriatric word, and wouldn't hesitate to tell her so. No, she had no dependents, Corinne thought, with a grin.

As for the other requirements . . . she still held the magazine in her hands as she moved across to the mirror on the wall of her apartment.Mid-twenties . . . dark-haired . . . yes. She flicked the heavy weight of her burnished hair from her shoulders, where it lay loose and free when she relaxed at home. Attractive appearance. . . .

Corinne studied her face dispassionately in the mirror, trying to see herself through a potential employer's eyes. Her eyes were her best feature, clear and hazel and fringed by sweeping dark lashes as if she permanently wore false ones; a slightly retroussé nose and a full, rather sensual mouth that generally managed to hide any hint of voluptuousness by the wide engaging smile, revealing even white teeth. Her hair was a silky burnished copper, her figure slim enough, but rounded in all the right places. Yes, she decided. She would do on that count.

As for the rest—well, she adored traveling, if you counted infrequent trips to her aunt's cottage in darkest Yorkshire, and a penchant for browsing through travel brochures, and the odd weekend to the Channel Islands. She brushed that aside. If Mr. John Gable, Solicitor, required her to travel, she would travel. With every minute that passed, she was talking herself into picking up the telephone and applying for the job. It was a challenge, and Corinne had never been afraid of a challenge.

And what was there for her here? She glanced around the rented apartment, seeing that, too, through dispassionate eyes. She had personalized it with posters and potted plants and a few photographs, but at twenty-five it was time she had something more permanent.

She moved resolutely to the telephone in the corner of the room and dialed the number before she started weighing up any disadvantages. There had to be *some* . . . but unless the man was thinking of shipping her off to some foreign country as the plaything of an oil sheik. . . .

"Hello?" she said quickly, as a male voice answered at the other end of the line. "Is this Mr. John Gable, who advertised the position with—uh—excellent prospects in the—"

"It is." He didn't even let her finish, and she could hear the sudden interest in his voice. "I take it you've read the ad thoroughly and noted all the requirements? We've had a few applicants already who have been entirely unsuitable."

"Oh, I've given it careful thought before I phoned," Corinne said. "It sounds—ideal—if you could give me a few more details about the job?"

"Unfortunately, I can't discuss details over the telephone. I hope you will be able to understand that. However, I do require a few details from you—just a record of employment and perhaps a hint about your preferences. Let's just start with your name. Could you give me that, please?"

"It's Corinne Nelson," she replied. He certainly sounded adroit, she thought.

Effortlessly, the voice at the other end began to question her about her recent job and where she had been brought up. Corinne answered automatically until finally he startled her by saying, "And can you come for an interview at the Penville Hotel in Truro on Friday afternoon at, say, three o'clock?"

"I think so. . . ." She was losing her grip on this conversation. An interview at a hotel sounded suspicious. Why wasn't it at his chambers? "How will I recognize you, Mr. Gable?"

"Oh, I won't be there. No, it's my client, Mr. Ashley Jay, who is advertising the position. He'll meet you in the main foyer then, at three o'clock. I'm sure he'll recognize you, Miss Nelson, if you are anything like the description mentioned in the advertisement."

There was a smile in his voice that she knew was meant to reassure her, but if anything it irritated her. Why did Ashley Jay choose to interview her in a hotel instead of his business premises? She began to feel slightly uneasy, hoping she wasn't letting herself in for something she couldn't handle. Suppose Mr. Ashley Jay turned out to be some kind of kinky old man who liked to surround himself with glamorous young women? If that was the case, she would know it as soon as she went for the interview. Oh, she was still going. If anything, she was even more intrigued now.

"On Friday at three o'clock then," she heard John Gable say smoothly. "I will inform Mr. Jay immediately, and I wish you every success with the interview, Miss Nelson. You may find it—er—rather an unusual kind of proposition, but I hope you will listen to it and consider it carefully before you decide on one course or another."

Corinne stared at the receiver in her hand as she heard the click at the other end and knew that John Gable had hung up just as she was about to demand a little more information. She doubted if she would have got it, though. There was something about the tone of his voice that told her she would have to wait and see Mr. Ashley Jay himself before she knew what all this was about. It was like taking a step into the unknown.

Despite the questions, John Gable hadn't even asked where she lived. It was far enough to travel from Somerset to Truro just for an interview. She might have been hard-pressed to find the fare . . . but of course, she wouldn't. A girl who would read the kind of glossy magazine in which the ad was inserted, and one who'd be sufficiently self-assured and curious to answer such an ad, had to be the type Ashley Jay was looking for. She began to have a grudging respect for the cleverness of the man. He'd thought very carefully about the wording of his advertisement, all right. Not merely in respect of giving little away about the job he was offering, but because he was a shrewd guesser as to the type of person who would answer it.

Corinne spent the next two days preparing for the trip. She decided she might as well stay overnight in some little guest house and see something of the neighborhood. She wouldn't risk booking in advance at the Penville, in case it was some fancy place she couldn't really afford. She booked her ticket in advance at the railway station while she was in town shopping for a suitably demure dress and jacket to wear to an interview at a posh hotel, and on Friday morning she boarded the midmorning train for Cornwall.

She arrived during the early afternoon and strolled around the twisting streets of the city, admiring the light gray stone of the cathedral, the Truro River and

Boscawen Park alongside, refusing to acknowledge to herself that she was suddenly nervous. But an interview was a two-way affair, wasn't it? Either one of the parties might dislike the other and the whole deal would be off. It was a bit like an engagement before the final commitment to marriage. Corinne's thoughts veered away from that particular subject, for that very weekend Harvey Newsome and his new love had announced their engagement in the county newspaper, and the fact of his fickleness still had the power to twist her heart.

She had left her overnight case at the railway station, not wanting to appear at the Penville Hotel looking gauche and unbusinesslike. She asked the way and was directed without hesitation, and once in front of it, she understood why. It had to be one of the biggest and most imposing places around. Set back from a tree-lined road in its own setting of shrubs and waving palm trees, it was solidly expensive-looking, from the mullioned windows and plush velvet curtains to the leather chairs scattered throughout the main foyer, polished to dark gleaming perfection.

A young boy in a dark green uniform looked at her inquiringly, but before she could give her name a tall, dark man moved toward her with lithe, easy grace. A man in his early thirties, she surmised, with rugged good looks that did not really come alive until he held out his hand and smiled. The warmth of his smile took her completely by surprise. It completely changed his face.

"Miss Corinne Nelson, I believe," he stated rather than asked. His voice was pleasantly firm, as if he was used to stating the correct information, and rarely made a mistake. She found herself murmuring her assent, and heard him request the green-uniformed boy to bring tea and scones with Cornish cream into the lounge. The boy acted promptly. Corinne suspected most people would when Ashley Jay made a request. He was that kind of man. She tried not to study him too obviously as he led her inside the hotel to the lounge, his hand held lightly under her elbow. When they were seated in a window alcove, looking out on smooth green lawns, she realized he was studying her just as overtly.

"Will I do?" he suddenly asked softly in the attractive, slightly Cornish accent he had. Corinne felt herself blushing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

"Why not? Our faces will soon be as well known to each other as our own, so why not get to know them?"

"If we suit each other," she began. "For the job, I mean."

"Ah, yes."

"About the job, Mr. Jay—" He was unnerving her again.

"I always think it's more important to talk socially to a prospective addition to one's life than actually set them some sort of test as if they were still at school, don't you?"

Corinne stared at him. This was the oddest interview she had ever been involved in. She began to wonder if the small handful of references she had brought with her were going to be even glanced at by this unconventional employer.

"You were fairly specific in your advertisement," she went on. "A well-educated young lady was the term you used, I believe . . ."

"And since you speak with a well-modulated voice and read the correct type of magazines and didn't shock my solicitor by appearing too vain and money-grabbing on the phone, I would assume that fact to be the case without pursuing the details," he said calmly.

A waitress in black dress and little white cap and apron straight out of a forties film glided across to their table, setting out the china teacups and saucers and pot of tea, and the Cornish cream tea. The small ritual gave her a breathing space before she suddenly got the most appalling attack of cold feet and blurted out that she'd merely been reading the magazine in the dentist's waiting room. She took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye.

"Before we go any further, Mr. Jay, will you tell me what the job is you're offering? I assume it's secretarial work of some kind and I am well qualified for that."

Surely now he'd come clean, she reasoned. It was only a guess, and she didn't particularly want another stint as somebody's private secretary, but having asked him directly, he would have to say yes or no. He merely laughed and asked if she'd care to pour out the tea.

"All in good time, Miss Nelson—or may I call you Corinne? I don't want to frighten you off as soon as you hear my proposition. We'll enjoy our tea first and get to know each other a little."

She was suddenly irritated. John Gable had referred to the post as a "proposition" as well, she remembered. As if there was something underhand or not quite legal involved here. She opened her mouth to protest when he smiled again.

"And I'd like it very much if you would call me Ashley," he said. "Now tell me about yourself. You have no family, of course. Where have you been living until now?"

Of course, he would assume she was alone in the world. No ties, no dependents, she reminded herself. But that "until now" bit tagged on to the end of his last sentence seemed to take it for granted that she would accept the job. Suddenly she felt that she was not being interviewed so much as being grabbed at, almost as a last resort. He was being extraordinarily charming, she thought suspiciously, and yet she had the surest feeling that that smiling mouth could switch in a moment to a furious cold line if he was thwarted.

"I live near Shepton Mallet in Somerset."

"Good God! I didn't realize you'd come so far. You'll allow me to reimburse you for your train fare, of course."

"Oh, it's all right. I thought I'd stay overnight anyway and take a look around while I'm here," she said hastily.

"That's a good idea." He looked straight at her. "Do you like horses?"

She was startled at his sudden question. "I've never had much to do with them. Yes, I suppose—well, I don't dislike them."

"Good. You'll need to learn to ride, of course."

"Oh, of course." This was all getting a little ludicrous, Corinne thought. She began to feel a bit reckless, light-headed.

"And no boyfriends or husbands lurking in the background?" he shot at her suddenly.

"Well, not in the plural." She was openly laughing now, but he looked at her unsmilingly, and she sobered up at once. "No, no boyfriends, and no husband."

She was disturbingly aware that he was slowly letting his gaze wander freely over her, studying her face and the burnished swirl of her hair. Her pulse started to race at the intensity of his look and the sudden darkening of his eyes.

"What is it you want of me, Mr. Jay?" she said stiffly, unable to call him by his first name.

He calmly poured them each a second cup of tea without asking if she

wanted one before he answered her. When he did, it completely took her breath away.

"I want you to be my wife," he said.

She was sharply aware of her own intake of breath. Of the slight tremor of his hand on his knife as he spread strawberry jam on his scone; of the plaintive cry of a gull somewhere outside.

"Are you mad?" she asked furiously. "Or is this some kind of bad joke? I came here expecting to be offered a good job, not to have a ridiculously impossible suggestion thrown at me across the teacups."

"I'm not mad, and neither am I untruthful, and if you think back carefully to the advertisement, you'll agree that there was never any mention of a job, Corinne. Excellent prospects was the phrase I used, if I remember correctly." His voice was clipped.

"Have you had many applicants for the position?" she asked sarcastically.

"Oh, a few," he said briefly. "But if it's any kind of reassurance to you, I haven't got as far as proposing to any of the others until now."

"Oh, is that what it was—a proposal?" She was still seething, and it was his turn to be angry.

"Well, a business proposal, naturally. I'm not suggesting we rush into church and out again and leap straight into bed. In fact, that part of it wouldn't enter into the bargain."

She stared at him. There was more here than the mere desire to furnish himself with a wife without the usual need for soft lights and sweet music. She was curious to know more.

"You'd better explain, hadn't you?" she said quietly.

"I apologize for making rather a hash of all this." His voice was suddenly stiff with embarrassment. "It all seemed like a good idea at the time, when John and I thought it out."

"John Gable, solicitor," she murmured.

"That's right. He's also a very good friend of mine."

"He must be, to agree to being a party to this. I'm not at all sure that it can be ethical."

"I assure you that it is," he went on in that odd clipped voice.

"Go on." She offered no help.

He suddenly made an angry exclamation. "God, this is more difficult than I thought," he muttered. "Look here, Corinne, Miss Nelson—I'll have to say it bluntly. There's no way I can pussyfoot around it."

"That would be best."

"Well then. I have to go to Italy in a month's time for my grandmother's eightieth birthday. It's to be a special occasion, and almost certainly her last, according to her doctors. She especially wants to see me—and my wife."

Corinne began to see a glimmer of light.

"And you're not married," she stated. "But aren't you going to rather ridiculous lengths to satisfy an old lady's whims? Why not take along a girlfriend and pass her off as your wife or something? I shouldn't imagine you'd have any difficulty in finding someone agreeable to an all-expenses-paid holiday for a week or however long it takes."

Remembering the effect his lingering gaze had had on her, Corinne was quite sure any prospective girlfriend would leap at the chance.

"It's not that easy. You see, I *was* married."

"Oh!" This conversation was getting more and more bizarre.

"My wife died in an accident soon after our honeymoon," he said briefly. "There's no need for you to know the circumstances, but my grandmother has seen photographs of her, and though her eyesight is very poor now, she'll expect to see someone with the same characteristics as I described in my letter informing her of my marriage."

"Informing her? That doesn't sound like a very close relationship," Corinne commented.

"It isn't in the usual sense. I haven't seen my grandmother for five years, but being the matriarchal type of Italian woman, she insisted on knowing when I was safely married, as she put it. And I assure you, she would sense in a moment if the woman I brought with me for her birthday was merely a girlfriend, Corinne."

"She must know something about your wife though. Her name, for instance? Or am I supposed to take that on as well?" she asked sarcastically.

"Since you must know everything, you'd better know that I'd had words with some of my family just prior to my marriage," he said coldly. "We were not on good terms, so when I was married I merely wrote to inform my grandmother without going into details. A while later a generous check arrived for a wedding present, but by the time I wrote to thank her, there were—difficulties here. I did not elaborate on my wife, and I do not think I even mentioned her name, strange as it may seem to you. We are not close correspondents, and Grandmother is a very self-contained person who would not pry into my affairs."

It was ludicrous, Corinne thought. To consider marrying a stranger. . . .

"Is she very wealthy?" she asked, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Extremely," he said shortly. "And if it wasn't for the fact that I need her money desperately and am willing to stake everything on this gamble, I would never consider this proposition."

"Ah! So it's money you're after." She couldn't keep the scorn out of her voice.

"Not for me. For Merrowporth. A house—a home—one that I love dearly, and it's rapidly falling into disrepair, and I want to keep it going."

"My God! You mean you're trying to cheat an old lady out of her money when she dies by passing me off as your wife, Mr. Jay?"

"Keep your voice down," he hissed, as several women at another table glanced their way. "It's not the way you make it sound. The money is mine by right—if some cheap little Italian upstart hadn't appeared on the scene and claimed to be my long-lost cousin, there would have been no problem. Now she's torn between keeping her money in her beloved Italy and doing what her instincts tell her is right. And I know her well enough to know that if I go out there, seemingly happily married, she'll stick to her guns and not let this Georgio worm his way into her affections. She's a great one for The Family, is Grandmother."

Corinne stared at him. His gall was unbelievable. She had to believe all he had told her. It was too incredible a story to do otherwise. But what was so special about a house that he would go to such lengths to keep it?

"You said something about a business arrangement," she said slowly, aware of the color heightening her cheeks. "I'm not saying I agree to this idea of yours—I just want to know all the facts."

"Naturally it would be a business arrangement. A marriage in name only. And though it may sound callous, it need only last as long as my grandmother is alive. As I told you, she is nearing eighty, and in failing health. It will not be for too long, I feel sure."

She hesitated. It was foolish to consider it even for a moment. She should be storming out of this hotel this instant and making her way back to the railway station and sanity.

"Corinne." He suddenly leaned toward her across the table and took her hands in his. The sudden contact sent an odd little thrill through her, as did the earnestness on his ruggedly good-looking face, and his dark eyes gazing into hers. "Don't dismiss me as a crank or a cheat. You say you intended staying down here tonight to look around the place. Instead of booking in at a hotel, come down to Merrowporth with me and see it for yourself. Stay a night—a week—as long as it takes for you to realize what a crime it would be for such a beautiful place to fall into decay. You took the first step when you answered my ad. A girl with a lively mind shouldn't turn her back on an intriguing situation."

"All right," she agreed hesitantly. "As long as there are no strings attached. I'm merely coming to Merrowporth as your guest for one night, to consider things."

She followed him out of the Penville Hotel, surprised to find it was still afternoon and the autumn sun still warm in the sky. She seemed to have been inside the sticky warmth of the lounge for hours, but the whole interview had taken less than three-quarters of an hour. He led her outside to a sleek blue Jaguar and opened the passenger door for her. He couldn't be that hard up if he could run one of these, she thought instantly.

"Oh, my case! I'll have to collect it from the station," she said quickly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Jay . . ."

"Right. And for God's sake unbend enough to call me Ashley, will you? Whether we seal this bargain or not, we've come too far to be on such formal terms as you seem to insist. Relax, Corinne. I won't eat you."

His own face suddenly relaxed into the warmth of his smile, and she found herself smiling back as he slid into the driver's seat beside her. Oh well, she thought recklessly, she might as well make the most of seeing how the other half lived. Once she collected her suitcase from the railway station, the blue Jaguar sped smoothly southwest across the high roads through villages with quaint-sounding names like Summercourt and Indian Queens, on through Redruth and its adjoining town of Cambourne, until they struck out through country roads that were little more than tracks, and then Ashley brought the car slowly to a halt and pointed to the horizon.

"I always think this is the most perfect view," he said with a kind of reverence in his voice. "Get out and stretch your legs for a minute, and take a good look at it, Corinne."

They both got out of the car and walked to the side of the road, to lean on a farm gate. Away across the fields was a large, sprawling graystone house, with creeper-clad walls and the same kind of mullioned windows as the Penville Hotel in Truro.

She was suddenly aware that Ashley had put his arm lightly around her shoulders, and with the other one was pointing out the sparkle of the sea in the distance, blue and inviting, with the craggy prominence of St. Michael's Mount rearing out of it in its stark, rugged beauty. She could smell the tweedy scent of his jacket and catch the aroma of his aftershave, and considering the outrageous nature of their conversation that afternoon, she didn't find it as repugnant as it should have been. Nothing could be repugnant here, she thought suddenly. It was so tranquil, so beautiful, the air as sweet as wine, with the scent of wild honeysuckle in the hedgerows strong in her nostrils. A magical place . . . enchanted. . . .

"Well?" Ashley was saying softly, very close to her ear. "Shall we go and look at the house? I guarantee you'll fall in love with it, Corinne."

His hand squeezed her shoulder, and for a moment she was pressed close to his lean body, feeling the warmth and the strength of him. Would he be able to guarantee too, that she didn't fall in love with him?

As they neared the house, the sun, now low in the sky, threw a pink glow on the mullioned windows and picked out the faint glitter of the stonework. Ashley pulled the car to a stop outside an elegant, solid oak door. A woman appeared from inside it as soon as he opened it, as if she had been hovering behind the tall window in the hallway, waiting for them.

Corinne looked uncertainly at the woman, gray-haired, more than middle-aged, her thin face registering strong disapproval, and felt her heart sink at the look in the woman's brown eyes. Was she the housekeeper or a member of Ashley's family?

"So you've come," the woman said coldly.

"Now then, Rennie, this is Miss Nelson," Ashley said easily. "She'll be staying for tonight, maybe longer. Is the room ready for her?"

"It's ready," the woman said sourly. "You'll be wanting tea, I take it?"

"Not just now. We're awash with tea already. Take Miss Nelson's case upstairs, there's a love. I'm going to show her around the place, and she can see her room later."

They spoke as if she wasn't there, exchanging more little pleasantries while she stood motionless beside them. It was perfectly clear from Rennie's attitude that she wasn't welcome here, and that she did not approve of the plan Ashley Jay had concocted to obtain the legacy he felt was rightly his. It seemed a most peculiar relationship, with Ashley almost seeming to placate the woman by his determination to remain pleasant.

He was watching her. Rennie had gone silently out of the room. His eyes were mocking, and she realized she had been gazing unseeingly at a beautiful rosewood china cabinet standing in a corner of the entrance hall. Perhaps he assumed she'd been assessing its value, she suddenly raged inside. Oh, a fine marriage this would be, with each of them labeling the other as a money-grabbing cheat!

"You were going to show me round," she said curtly.

"So I was." He kept his voice even and spread his hands expressively around the elegant hall, carpeted with jewel-bright Axminster in contrast with the starkly plain walls and soft velvet curtains. "You can see by the thickness of the walls and alcoves that it's an old house—nearly two hundred years old, in fact. They didn't need to skimp on building materials in those days, and as most families were large they needed plenty of rooms." He suddenly dropped his guidebook patter and grinned at her. "There are sufficient bedrooms for us to have one each, if the thought of sharing one with me was bothering you," he went on.

"I hadn't expected you to be interested in sharing."

"Oh, I don't know," he said lightly. "It might be quite a delightful experience."

"Forget it, Ashley. Let's just stick to business."

She refused to smile back at him, and saw a muscle tighten in his jaw. When he made the jokes, he liked people to laugh, she thought grimly. The smile was still on his face, but there was no warmth in it now, and she could see he was forcing himself to stay polite.

"Perhaps you'd like to see outside before it gets too cool. The temperature drops fairly quickly up here once the sun goes down, because we're quite high up, and even at this time of year it's deceptive. I'll show you the stables." He escorted her outside to the back of the house.

"You do have horses then?"

"Why would I mention them if I didn't? Maybe I forgot to tell you how important they are to the lifeblood of Merrowporth. Much of its income comes from the estate, of course, the farms and cottages hereabouts." He spoke calmly, as if he had no idea he was giving her a glimpse of an entirely different world. "But apart from that we're just limping along with the pony business—hiring them out to the tourists and so on. Not a very profitable or inspiring business, really. What I do want to do is expand. There's so much wasted land here, and ample scope for breeding. And a riding school would really put us on the map. It's badly needed. I visualize Canadian-style cabins for the clients beyond that thick line of trees over there, you see? We'd plant more trees, of course, to keep them hidden from the house and surrounding area."

His voice had become more enthusiastic and animated than at any time since she'd met him. There was a boyishness about him, an eagerness in his eyes that surprised her.

They had arrived at the stables now. A large brown horse pushed his nose toward Ashley's hand, looking vainly for sugar. He laughed, stroking the long sleek nose with sensitive fingers.

"This one's Tommy," he said affectionately. "He's mine. A beauty, isn't he?"

She nodded, feeling absurdly choked at the way his eyes softened as he spoke gently to the horse. There was no business arrangement between these two, she thought, just a mutual affection.

She listened to him telling her the names of the other horses. There had been the same surge of emotion in his voice when he'd spoken of his proposed plans for the riding school . . . futile plans, she guessed, without the added backing of his grandmother's legacy.

It was in her power to help him attain his goal. But why should she? Why should she agree to this farcical scheme he and his solicitor friend had dreamed up? Morally it was wrong. It was deceiving an old lady, no matter how much he protested that the money was his birthright and should be his legally when she died.

"You can try out the gray mare, if you fancy it, tomorrow," he was saying now.

"It sounds lovely, but I'll decline all the same if you don't mind. I didn't bring any jeans with me."

"Are you afraid of riding? She's quite spirited, but I'm sure you can handle her." His eyes challenged her. As if he knew damn well she had never sat on a horse in her life, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of backing down now. Suddenly his brown eyes ranged over her. "As for the jeans—no problem. I can probably find some to fit you, as long as you don't mind wearing a pair of mine."

Well, it was better than having him produce a pair that had belonged to an old girlfriend, wasn't it? Or his wife. She glared into those disturbing brown eyes, angry with him for cornering her about the riding, and with herself for not coming clean at once. But thinking about previous girlfriends had started her wondering again. He must have had some . . . he was undeniably attractive, with an animal magnetism.

"I've been wondering about your other girlfriends." Her voice was infuriatingly high-pitched, and she forced it down a notch or two. "Haven't they been fighting over each other to spend a few months with you posing as your wife? Blond or brunette—a bottle of hair dye would have fixed that. You needn't have bothered going through with this farce. You could have married one of your girlfriends and that would have been that. You could have enjoyed yourself in every way. I mean, you have had girlfriends, I suppose?"

She was suddenly floundering, embarrassed at her own daring, and at the way his mouth was tightening into a furious line.

"Don't fool yourself that I haven't. But I've had my fill of so-called enjoyment. I've learned that it doesn't last. It's as elusive as the mist you'll see tomorrow morning when you look out of your bedroom window. Fragile and beautiful from a distance, but when you try to hold it, it disappears and you're left with nothing. I don't believe in so-called 'relationships'"—the way he said it was an insult—"so rest assured that anything between us will be purely platonic, my pretty Corinne."

Her face burned.

"Are you implying that I'd be afraid of your advances, or that I might be interested in changing the arrangement because I fell under your spell?" she asked.

"You're not exactly indifferent to me now, are you?" he said smoothly.

She spluttered with fury. "You manage to rile me more quickly than anyone else I've ever known, if that's what you mean!"

He suddenly pulled her toward him, holding her so tightly it was impossible for her to move away. She was imprisoned in the circle of his arms, his mouth barely a whisper away from hers.

"I'll make a bet with you here and now, Corinne," he said softly. "If we come to an agreement about our marriage, you'll be the one to give in first."

"Give in? What do you mean, give in? I don't know—"

"You know exactly what I mean." His lips brushed hers, lightly, tantalizingly. "I'll bet you'll be the one to come knocking on my bedroom door before I knock on yours."

"Never!" she said furiously.

His mouth pressed down on hers in a savage kiss, unrestrained in its passion. His body pushed hard against hers, molding itself to hers. Involuntarily her arms reached up and held him and her lips responded, all her nerves quivering at the unexpectedness of his embrace. And just as suddenly he let her go.

"Never?" he mocked her.

Her mouth trembled, with fury and shame and something akin to panic. He was the first man who had kissed her since Harvey, and not even he had provoked such a swift response from her. She must be more vulnerable than she had suspected, but if he thought he was going to play some kind of game with her to feed his vanity, driving her to the brink of passion to prove his superiority, he could just think again. She had outgrown the need for games a long time ago.

"Can we go inside now, please?" she said icily. She gave a small shiver, though not strictly because she was feeling cold.

"Of course." He capitulated, switching on his charming smile again. He tucked her arm in his before she could resist. "Don't worry. I'll be on my best behavior from now on."

They were like any engaged couple, strolling through the grounds in the late afternoon sunlight, she thought suddenly. Except that they were not engaged, of course. She felt suddenly embarrassed at being here like this, when she had no intention of doing as he asked. Even though, as he said, it would be all too easy to fall in love with Merrowporth.

"Who is Rennie, Ashley?" she said quickly. "I don't want to make some idiotic mistake."

"Forgive me, Corinne, I should have explained her to you. I am not usually so remiss in my manners, but you'll appreciate that this situation is entirely new to me. Rennie keeps house for me, as she has done for a good many years, since my parents died, in fact. She is also my mother's cousin, and therefore more outspoken than an outsider might expect. Does that answer your question?"

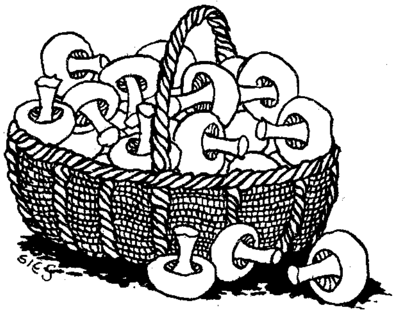
Corinne nodded. "Then she knew—your wife?" she said hesitantly. "And why I am here?"

"Rennie probably knows more about me than anyone else on earth," he said briefly. "She's been a second mother to me, and once she makes a friend of you, she'll be your friend for life."

At the house Rennie met them and said she'd show Corinne her room. Together they walked up the thickly carpeted staircase, along a wide passageway and into the loveliest bedroom Corinne had ever seen. Pastel blue carpet and curtains and a frothy white bedspread and lampshades proclaimed this as a feminine room, as did all the little extra touches, like the gilt brush and comb set on the dressing table. A feminine room . . . but surely not . . . Corinne bit her lip. She turned quickly to Rennie, unable to hide the distress in her hazel eyes.

"This wasn't her room, was it? Mrs. Jay's. . . ." If it was, it was unthinkable for him to expect her to sleep in his first wife's room, knowing what he had in mind. Rennie's brown eyes softened and her face changed from its wary expression into a smile of understanding.

"No, my dear. It's not her room. It's the main guest room, and I hope you'll find it comfortable. There's an adjoining bathroom through the door there." She gestured to her left. "Dinner will be in half an hour. You'll find the dining room along the passage to your left as you come down the stairs, but I daresay Ashley will hear you come down and be waiting for you." She hesitated. "I'm—glad you've come," she said simply, and left the room quickly.



Corinne stared at the door and sat down heavily on the bed. It was all a dream, she thought. Here she was, ensconced in a huge house with the unexpected approval of the housekeeper after her earlier mistrust, with an offer of marriage in name only to the most attractive man she'd ever met. It was a dream beyond anything she could have imagined, but she was all too well aware that it could turn into a nightmare. She would have to go to Italy with him as his wife. They would have to act the part of the happily married young couple, and she wasn't sure her emotions could stand up to it.

She moved restlessly about the room. At least Rennie had relented in her stiff attitude toward her. She had no wish to have anyone antagonistic toward her. It was strange that she had changed, though. Presumably she was very fond of Ashley and had gone along with his fantastic scheme because he wished it. But she'd want someone who was going to care for him . . . with a flash of insight Corinne guessed that the first Mrs. Ashley Jay might have been responsible for his bitter attitude toward what he called "relationships." If that were so, Rennie would be up in arms at the suggestion of another designing female coming into the house . . . but what else would she suspect a girl who'd answer the advertisement of being, than someone ambitious and pleasure-seeking? And yet her attitude had suddenly changed. . . .

Corinne went into the adjoining bathroom and had a refreshing wash before applying fresh makeup and changing her dress. She'd packed another one on the spur of the moment in case she decided to go out for a meal in Truro that evening. Now she was glad she'd done so, and smoothed the soft green folds of the dress over her hips, remembering the way Ashley's eyes had lingered on them earlier.

She moved abruptly out of the bathroom and glanced at her watch. She may as well go downstairs and find the dining room. There was another door leading from her bedroom. She opened it cautiously, wondering if it led downstairs, and found herself in another bedroom, similar to hers, but in a very different decor. A very masculine room, from the dark carpet and quilt on the bed, to the short terry robe hanging up behind the other door. *His* bathrobe, she thought instantly. And his room was adjacent to hers, with the width of a door separating them. Her breath was coming quickly in her throat as she sped back into her room and turned the key determinedly in the lock of the adjoining door. That would settle any suggestion of after-dinner fraternizing, she thought indignantly. She threw the key on to her dressing table and went demurely downstairs.

She swept into the dining room to find him at the sideboard mixing drinks. He'd changed, too, into a formal dark jacket and trousers, and he smiled approvingly when she entered the room.

"You look delightful, Corinne," he said smoothly. "A pre-dinner sherry?"

"Yes, please." His impeccable manners unnerved her more than anything else. He was an engaging and lively companion, and he drew her out of her prickly shell so that she managed to forget for a little while why she was here, and to enjoy his company. In any other circumstances, she knew he'd be exactly the type of man with whom she'd choose to spend her time.

Rennie brought in a tureen of soup and wheeled a heated trolley of food into the room.

"If there's anything missing, just ring the bell," she said cheerfully, and disappeared.

Corinne stared. Was this to be a tête-à-tête then? Ashley told her to sit down and hand her soup dish over to him.

"Doesn't Rennie eat with you?" she said suspiciously.

He laughed. "Stop thinking that everything is a put-up job to lure you into my clutches, will you?" She blushed, knowing she'd been thinking exactly that. "As a matter of fact, Rennie's one and only vice, as far as I know, is that she prefers eating a meal in front of the television, and as I can't stand the blasted thing on at mealtimes, we always eat separately. There's nothing more sinister in it that that, I assure you!"

"But you are trying to lure me into your clutches, aren't you, Ashley?" She looked into his eyes across the width of the table. "Be honest. How can you deny it?"

"I don't think you can put it quite like that. There are certain advantages on your side of it, you know. And I shall make no demands on you other than to behave in public as convention decrees. In private we shall make our own rules."

"Just as long as you stick to the rules," she murmured. Her eyes were down on her dish and she missed the gleam of triumph in his.

The dinner was excellent, and she complimented Rennie on the fact when she came to take the plates away. Did she offer to help with the washing-up, Corinne wondered? She decided against it, and was relieved she had done so a few minutes later when Ashley announced to Rennie that they wouldn't bother with coffee as he thought he'd take Corinne out for a drive that evening to show her around the coastline.

"That was all right with you, I take it? I always find coffee after a heavy meal is just too much," he commented when she'd fetched her jacket and was sliding into the car beside him.

"I agree," she smiled, thinking it was typical of him to make the arrangements and ask her opinion afterward.

It was a balmy evening, with long fingers of pink still streaking the blue haze of the sky in the lingering dusk. She hadn't visited this part of Cornwall before, and was enchanted with everything she saw, especially the dark mass of the Mount just offshore.

"It's so beautiful," she breathed. "I didn't realize it was this beautiful."

His arm slid around her shoulders in the car where they were parked. He bent his head toward her and kissed her for the second time, a slow, unhurried kiss without passion, and yet it had the power to stir her senses as much as that other one. She could feel herself responding again, and her arms moved to hold him when he broke gently away from her.

"Shall we go and have a nightcap?" he said huskily. "There's an "olde worlde" inn along one of the lanes that I think you'd like, all horse brasses and the like, and the landlord's a real character."

"Fine." She smiled into his eyes, glad he'd suggested it, because staying here with him and succumbing to the enchantment of the bay was dangerous.

He drove carefully along the lanes until he found a space to park, and they went inside the inn. The landlord nodded brightly to Ashley and herself, and they settled down in a small alcove, half listening to the banter going on between a couple of locals battling it out on the dartboard.

"Ashley, darling!" A female voice suddenly gushed out of the air. "Where have you been hiding yourself lately?"

An elegant blonde in cream-colored slacks and a red sweater insinuated herself toward them, casting a cursory glance at Corinne and then ignoring her. She pressed a quick kiss on the side of Ashley's cheek and called across the room to the people with her to come and join them.

"God, you don't mind, do you?" She feigned a sudden embarrassment as she looked from Ashley to Corinne. "I mean, you weren't planning anything private, were you?"

It was so archly done it had to be deliberate, Corinne thought. She disliked her on sight, from the top of her cool blond head and chocolate box features, to the peremptory way she pushed herself and her friends into their company. But how could she object? Presumably they were all Ashley's friends, and perhaps he'd be glad to see them. But stealing a look at his set face, she didn't think it was the case.

"Corinne, this is Stephanie," he said hurriedly when they were all crammed into the tiny alcove. "She's our nearest neighbor to Merrowporth, and this is Vince and Wally."

They nodded appreciatively toward Corinne, asking immediately if they could buy them a drink.

"Thanks, we've got one," Ashley said briefly. "We're not staying long, anyway, as Corinne's come down from Somerset today and she's pretty tired."

"I bet she is," Stephanie's eyes raked over Corinne, her words full of meaning that the men seemed to miss. But Corinne didn't, and she felt her face flame. Evidently this other girl knew Ashley well enough to know the effect he had on his girlfriends . . . and she wondered just what kind of a reputation he had around here.

"Are you staying long, Corinne?" Vince asked her. He looked friendly and uncomplicated, and she smiled gratefully at him.

"It rather depends on how I like it," she said lightly. "I had planned on going home tomorrow, but it's possible I may stay on a little longer."

She suddenly felt Ashley's sensitive fingers curl around her own on the cool leather seat. He drained his glass, and she did the same, assuming he wanted to get out of there.

"I shall certainly do my best to persuade her to stay on longer," he said pleasantly to the other three. He looked at her, a smile playing about his mouth, a sudden gleam in his eye. "Actually, I suppose we'd better come clean, hadn't we, darling? I should have introduced Corinne to you properly. Miss Corinne Nelson—my fiancée—and very soon to become Mrs.

Ashley Jay."

Corinne's gasp was lost in the warm congratulations from the two men and Stephanie's murmured words. What she actually said was indistinct, but the words didn't matter. The flashing look of fury she directed toward Corinne was enough to tell her that here was one person at least who wasn't overjoyed at the news of Ashley's engagement. And she was another. She followed him outside, holding her temper in check until she sat beside him in the car.

"You had no right to do that," she burst out. "How dare you introduce me as your fiancée before I've said whether or not I'll agree to your ridiculous idea? It was humiliating—and it will be even more so for you when you have to tell them it was all a mistake, won't it?"

"But I won't tell them that, will I, darling?" he said roughly, his arms suddenly reaching out to pull her toward him again, his face close to hers. "You've already decided to agree, haven't you? I can see it in your eyes, whatever you say, and all the arguments in the world aren't going to change your mind, are they? Why fight it, Corinne? It's inevitable. Don't you believe in fate?"

"I prefer to make my own decisions," she said angrily.

She tried to pull away from him, but he merely pulled her closer to him, suddenly pressing his mouth against hers in a long, lingering kiss. She was pinned against the passenger seat and there was nowhere for her to go, and she felt the treacherous appeal to her senses as she responded despite herself.

"Well, Corinne?" he barely moved, murmuring against her lips. "How much more persuasion do you need? It was no mistake back there, was it, telling them you were my fiancée? Meeting you was kismet for both of us. We belong together, you and I. And you are going to marry me, aren't you? *Aren't* you?"

"Yes," she whispered huskily, hardly knowing what she was saying, conscious only of the fact that he continued kissing her. Finally he moved away from her and started up the engine.

She was appallingly tired, with a tiredness that came from the assault on her emotions, and when they returned to Merrowporth she said jerkily that she was going straight to bed. He didn't try to dissuade her, and by the time she slid between the covers, she was almost falling asleep.

She awoke to the sound of the curtains being swished back in her room. The light from the window was so bright it hurt her eyes, and when she turned her head away from it, she discovered she had an excruciating headache. She opened her eyes to find Rennie standing by her bed with a cup of tea and a tray of breakfast. The mere sight of it curdled her stomach.

"No food, thank you," she said faintly.

"Oh dear, like that, is it?" Rennie's voice was sympathetic. "Ashley said he'd taken you for a drink last night and given you some of our local brew. It's incredibly potent."

He knew this would happen, she raged, as the memory assailed her with all the happenings of last night. He'd got her tipsy, she'd been an easy target to his charms. He was even more devious than she thought.

She threw back the sheets, meaning to get up immediately and go storming downstairs to tell him the pseudo-engagement was off, and reeled back against the pillows again as the stabbing pain hit her between the eyes.

"You'd better stay there and I'll bring you some aspirin, Corinne," she heard Rennie say. "And do try to eat some toast if you can't face anything else. The tablets will need something to work on, and chewing some food often disperses a headache as quickly as anything."

Not this one, Corinne thought grimly. It was a mother and father of a headache.

"Is Ashley up yet?" she muttered.

"Oh yes, he was up early. He sends his apologies for not seeing you this morning, but when he looked in you were sleeping so soundly and he didn't want to waken you. He's gone into Truro to see Mr. Gable, and probably won't be back until after lunch."

The quick annoyance she felt at hearing he'd "looked in on her" while she was insensible was quickly replaced by a feeling of panic. He'd gone and left her here. In effect she was a prisoner here, since she had no idea how to get back to civilization. And if he'd gone to see John Gable it was clearly to set things in motion about the wedding, or to gloat with him over the undoubted success of their plan. She was furious, and if only her head didn't hurt so abominably she'd go storming out of there and hitch a lift with the first passing car that came along the main road—wherever that was.

Rennie was holding out two aspirin tablets toward her. She gulped them down quickly with the hot tea, and did as she was instructed and tried to force some toast down. She realized Rennie was fidgeting and looking ill at ease.

"You probably realized when you arrived yesterday that I didn't hold with this idea of Ashley's, Corinne," she said. "No matter how noble the motives, it seemed all wrong to make a mockery of a marriage, and someone seemed bound to get hurt. Probably you, since I know all too well the effect he can have on unsuspecting young women. And marriage is something sacred, isn't it? Not to be entered into lightly, or something like that. But now that I've seen you and got to know you a little, I truly believe it could turn out happily."

Corinne stared at her. "I don't think you understand," she said unsteadily. "It's supposed to be a marriage of convenience, Rennie, and as soon as—well, as soon as he's got what he wants, it will be annulled. There's no question of it turning out happily. It will be just another temporary job, as far as I'm concerned, and once it's over, I shall look around for something else."

God, how shallow that all sounded, she thought. And why was she still talking as if the marriage was still going to happen, when she'd definitely decided against it? She opened her mouth to tell Rennie, but the other woman had a secret sort of smile on her face as she tucked the blankets more firmly around Corinne.

"Haven't you ever heard about love coming after the ceremony just as easily as before?" she said archly. "How else would the world have survived in view of all the arranged marriages there are? And the Victorians were notorious for their large families, remember, and there was no nonsense talked then of having marriages annulled."

"Only because the poor downtrodden wives didn't dare," Corinne put in quickly. "Things are different now. Women are liberated, in case you hadn't heard."

If she hoped that would rile Rennie, it didn't have the slightest effect, she realized. She had the same kind of obstinacy of character as Ashley, she thought, and when she'd decided something should happen, she refused to believe it wouldn't. Furthermore, she was an incurable romantic, as she proved by her next statement.

"My prediction is that neither of you will want to end your marriage, Corinne. Something that begins so uncertainly and with everything against it can only improve. Maybe that's something the Victorian fathers knew that we didn't," she smiled. "Anyway, you try to sleep off your headache."

She should be snapping at her that there was not going to be any wedding, Corinne thought wildly as Rennie left and closed the door. But before she could sleep she would have to draw the shades. She slid out of bed and moved carefully to the window, trying not to jar her head. The sun was quite bright in the sky, but the ground was covered in mist, thin and wispy and insidious as it crawled over field and garden and moor. She shivered, suddenly remembering Ashley's words.

"... enjoyment is as elusive as the mist you'll see tomorrow morning when you look out of your bedroom window ... when you try to hold it it disappears and you're left with nothing. ..."

Yes, someone or something had definitely hurt him very much, she thought. But it wasn't her problem. She pulled the curtains across and padded back to bed.

She must have slept for an hour, because when she awoke again the headache had gone except for a dullness that was aggravated by lying in bed too long. Corinne got up carefully, went into her bathroom, and ran herself a soothing bath.

"Are you decent, Corinne?" she heard Rennie call to her from her bedroom, and poked her head around the door. Rennie had some clothing in her hand.

"Ashley asked me to let you have these if they're any use to you," she said. "There are some jeans and a shirt and sweater. I should think they'd all be too big for you, but you can try them if you want to feel more relaxed."

She left them on the bed. There was a belt with the jeans, and if she did it up to the tightest notch, they wouldn't look too bad. Ashley's hips must be about the same size as hers, she thought, her mind veering away from the way his taut body had pressed against her yesterday in the stables. But she wanted to get some fresh air and an idea was already simmering in her mind. The gray mare, he'd said. ...

Once bathed and dressed in the borrowed clothes, she felt decidedly better. She carried the tray down to the dining room, apologizing to Rennie for being unable to do justice to her excellent cooking.

"That's all right, my love. It'll give you more of an appetite for your lunch," Rennie smiled.

Corinne hesitated. Why didn't she tell her, she asked herself? Because she felt it only right to first tell Ashley that she couldn't continue with their "arrangement" one minute longer.

"Rennie, what was she like?" Her curiosity overcame her reluctance to know anything about Ashley's first wife. "Am I anything like her? I assume from what Ashley's told me that the reason for wording the advertisement as he did meant he wanted similar coloring and characteristics to his wife."

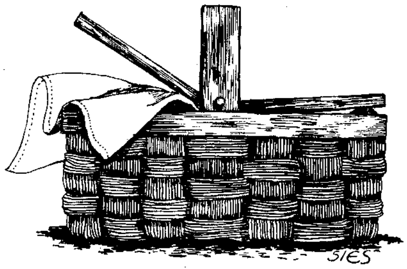
She gave a sudden shudder as the macabre thought of stepping into his first wife's shoes sped into her mind. Then she realized that Rennie had given a slight snort, and was shaking her head.

"You're as unlike Fleur as any two young women could be," she said positively. "Oh, you're about the same age, and superficially there are similarities, but no. No one would take you for being like her."

"Are there any photographs of her?" Corinne went on. "I just can't help being curious."

"Ashley got rid of them all," Rennie said. "But I have one or two in my room, and an account of the wedding. If you really want to see them, I don't suppose it would do any harm, as long as you don't let him know. He doesn't like any mention of her. The past is dead as far as he's concerned, and better left that way." She looked doubtfully at Corinne, willing her to agree and leave it at that. But some perverse little devil of capriciousness made Corinne move toward the door, and Rennie shrugged her shoulders and went past her out of the dining room.

Rennie had a complete suite of rooms, like a self-contained little apartment on the second floor. It was furnished comfortably, with warm autumn colorings and a fine collection of water colors on the walls.



The older woman went across to a desk in the corner of the room and opened a drawer, taking out a large envelope.

"I don't know why I keep them, really, except that it seems like blotting out a life completely to destroy them. Pretending it never happened at all, and she didn't exist. And for a short time, at least, she made Ashley very happy."

She drew out several photographs from the envelope and handed them to Corinne without speaking. She was aware of a thudding in her chest as she looked at the smiling face of Ashley's dead wife. Vivacious, dark-haired and dark-eyed, very beautiful, but with a coldness about her—almost a brittleness that showed through, even in a photograph. But she had made a stunning bride, Corinne thought, with a stab of envy as she looked at the lovely face surrounded by a cloud of dark hair, misted by the wedding veil covering her face.

The second photo showed her holding on to Ashley's arm, clinging to him, and laughing up into his face. Ashley was gazing into her eyes with a look of adoration. It was a very private look, Corinne realized, and it made her feel as if she was prying into something that didn't belong to her.

"They made a handsome couple, didn't they?" Rennie's voice was expressionless.

Yes, they did. With Fleur's classical beauty and the special look on Ashley's face. She handed the photos back to Rennie.

"What happened to her?" she asked in a controlled voice.

"She drowned," Rennie said briefly. "I'm sure you don't want to know all the details ... but it was near Penzance. .. "

"No, thank you." She was horrified enough at hearing that. She'd assumed it had been a car accident or something. That would have been bad enough, but the thought of suffocating beneath the waves was nauseating.

"You have too much imagination, Corinne. I can see it in your eyes. Let's go and have some coffee, shall we?"

"Do you mind if I go out for a while instead? Ashley said there was a gray mare I could ride, and I feel like getting outside in the fresh air. I'll have coffee later if that's all right."

"Of course it is. Fresh air will do you good. You look a bit peaky today, and you won't want to go to your wedding looking washed-out."

Corinne shook her head slightly in exasperation as she made her way out to the stables. There was a stableboy grooming the horses when she arrived, and she wondered doubtfully if she was doing the right thing in taking the gray out on her own. She tried to sound as confident as she could when she approached the lad.

"Good morning. Mr. Jay promised me a ride this morning on the gray mare. Is she ready?"

"Will be in just a minute, miss," he said respectfully. She waited while he trotted the gray out of her stall and saddled her up. She looked enormously big, Corinne thought uneasily, but quite docile.

"What's her name and yours?" she asked the lad.

"I'm Rob, and this is Heather," he grinned. "Want a leg up, do you, miss?"

He held out his arm, and somehow she slithered over the mare's back after finding the first stirrup, and Rob pushed her foot through the second one. She took hold of the reins and smoothed the back of the mare's head, talking to her soothingly while trying to ignore the thudding of her heart. She wouldn't lose face now by saying she'd changed her mind, she thought resolutely. But how did you make the thing start? It wasn't like a car, with an ignition key. Didn't you dig your heels into its side? She tried it, and gave a little jerk on the reins, and miraculously, the mare trotted off.

It was a strange, unfamiliar feeling to feel the power of Heather's flanks beneath her, and she talked to her all the time, as if by pretending to calm the mare she could calm her own jittery nerves. Instinctively, she sat bolt upright from sheer terror, not realizing that her posture was exactly right, and that Rob watched her go without suspecting for a moment that she was a complete novice.

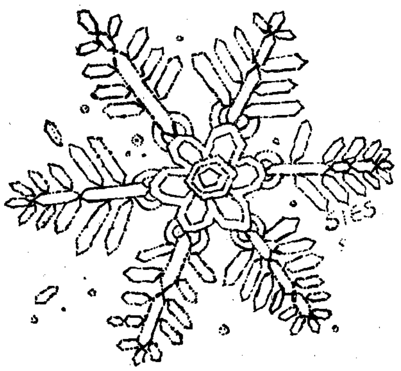
Once away from the house, Corinne began talking out loud to the mare with a more authoritative note in her voice.

"Now then, old girl, it's you and me against the world, isn't it? We'll just have a short trot and get to know each other today, just so your owner doesn't think I'm a complete idiot. Don't worry. I shan't gallop you into the ground."

The sound of her voice seemed to be agreeable to the mare, and she walked along complacently over the rough stony ground on top of the moor once they left the grounds of Merrowporth behind them. Corinne was suddenly exhilarated by the fact that it was going so well.

"Shall we try going a bit faster, girl?" she breathed, as the salt breeze caught at her hair and lifted her spirits high. "Let's see what we're made of, shall we?"

She dug her heels in harder and clicked at the mare, leaning forward over the saddle and clutching at the reins. It was almost like flying, she thought, exciting and breath-catching. She gave a sudden gasp as Heather veered sharply to the right without any warning as a rabbit darted across her path. Because Corinne wasn't experienced enough to have the slightest idea what to do, she was hurtled sideways out of the saddle and onto the stony ground, banging her head sharply and knocking her wind out. A couple of seconds later she tried to struggle to her feet, terrified that the mare would trot off and leave her. She could imagine how irate Ashley would be if he lost one of his precious beasts. She got up too fast, staggered blindly for a minute as the world spun in front of her, and collapsed on to the ground again as it came up to meet her.



When she came to she was being held roughly in someone's arms. They were arms that she had known before and a familiar tweedy scent came from a checked jacket. She was looking at an angry face inches away from her own.

"You damn silly little fool," Ashley snapped. "What in heaven's name possessed you to ride out on your own?"

"To prove that I wasn't incapable, perhaps." She tried to speak spiritedly, but she winced as she tried to move, feeling an ache in every muscle in her body and relaxed back against him again. "Wasn't that one of your stipulations in your stupid ad—that the applicant had to be capable?" Tears of frustration stung her eyes.

"We'd better forget all that for now," he said brusquely. "There's a nasty gash on your forehead, and you may have a spot of concussion. We'd better get the doctor in to look at you."

"I don't need a doctor, and I'm not concussed," she said. Her mouth trembled. "I'll admit that if there was any other way of getting back to Merrowporth than on a horse, I'd take it. I'm beginning to realize I have muscles in places I didn't know existed."

He grinned suddenly. "You'll do as you're told," he said shortly. "But you're right about one thing. I'm not trusting Heather to you again until you've had a few riding lessons. We'll double up on Tommy."

Not because he cared about her except as a means to an end, she fumed, but because of his precious mare.

He whistled to Tommy, who was grazing a little distance away, with Heather alongside him. They came to his call at once. Naturally, Corinne thought. He tethered the mare to Tommy's reins, and swung himself into the saddle with consummate ease. He was every bit the horseman, she thought, with an unwilling surge of admiration. He looked as if he belonged there, proud, arrogant and in complete control.

"You'd better come up behind me, I think, and hold on to me around my waist while we canter back," he said evenly. "Come on."

He leaned down and grabbed her around the waist. Every inch of her cried out in pain, but somehow his arm held her tightly until she hauled herself inelegantly over the horse's back, and clung on for dear life, her arms holding on to him, her face pressed into his back. He didn't speak on the ride back to Merrowporth, and that suited her fine. She was humiliated enough already at making such a fool of herself.

When they arrived at the stables, she sat back while he slid off Tommy's back and lifted her down. And this time he held her close with an odd expression in his eyes.

"You little fool," he said softly. "You don't have to half kill yourself to prove anything."

He walked her back to the house with his arm around her. Rennie came running out as soon as she saw them, demanding to know what had happened. He reassured her at once.

"Just a fall." Corinne was thankful he didn't elaborate. "Nothing too serious, I think, but I'll give Doc Masters a ring just to be on the safe side."

She was still protesting that it was all unnecessary when he strode off to the telephone. Once he decided on a course of action, he carried it through, she thought uneasily, and a few minutes later he rejoined them in the downstairs lounge.

"We're lucky—he's just finished his morning rounds and will be over in a jiffy before he has his lunch," he told them.

"Does everyone jump when you say the word?" Corinne murmured.

"Usually," he said calmly. He turned away. "Oh, by the way, Rennie, John will be coming down this afternoon. I asked him to stay for dinner, but he can't stay that long. He'll be here around three o'clock."

Coming to look her over, Corinne surmised. As if he read her thoughts, Ashley told her John Gable was looking forward to meeting her.

"He's now drafting a document at my request, to the effect that our marriage is to be dissolved at any time after the death of my grandmother that either one of us requests. Duly signed and witnessed, it will be quite legal, and I thought you would approve of it as a safeguard, Corinne."

She opened her mouth to speak just as the sound of a car pulling to a stop on the gravel outside sent Ashley striding toward the front door to let the doctor inside. They were obviously old friends, and though Ashley didn't introduce her as his fiancée, it was clear Doc Masters presumed her to be somebody special. He was about Ashley's own age, briskly efficient while he did his job, but with a friendly, old-school-tie appeal once he'd pronounced her fit enough, apart from the bruising.

"You took a nasty tumble, but there's no obvious sign of concussion, Miss Nelson," he said cheerfully. "The vision's perfectly clear, is it? And no sign of sweating anywhere . . . pulse perfectly normal . . . blood pressure fine. A perfect specimen, I'd say." He beamed at her beatifically like a well-scrubbed cherub. "No other problems bothering you?"

None that she could tell him about. "Only that I'm starving," she said truthfully as she felt a gnawing sensation in her stomach. Doc Masters laughed, getting up to go.

"Then I'd better let you have some of Rennie's excellent cooking, and get back to my own lunch before my wife slings me out on my ear for chatting to a pretty patient instead. I hope I'll see you again sometime, Miss Nelson."

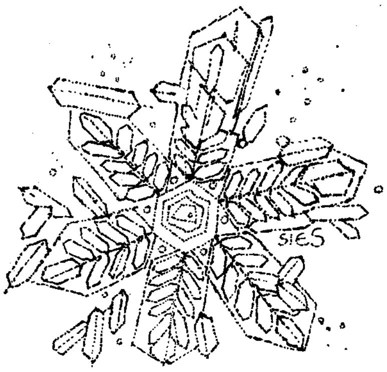
"Lunch is ready, Corinne," Rennie was saying. "Can you hobble into the dining room?"

"Oh, it's not too bad," she told her with a smile. "I think my dignity is as badly bruised as my skin. Maybe a hot bath will be a help after lunch."

John Gable was silver-haired and charming, leaning slightly on a stick in an old-fashioned stance as he rose to greet her when she came downstairs. He was not the kind of man she would have expected to agree to the kind of duplicity Ashley practiced.

"My dear Miss Nelson, we meet at last." He spoke as if he'd waited a long time for this moment.

"I shall leave you alone to talk while I prepare afternoon tea," Rennie said, after a few minutes. "I'm sorry Ashley's taking so long, John, but you know what he's like with estate business. I know he'll get away as soon as he can, knowing you were coming."



"Don't worry at all, dear lady," he waved his hands expressively. "I shall be perfectly happy getting to know Corinne a little better. You will allow me to call you by that delightful name of yours, won't you, my dear—and please call me John."

She felt as awkward as she had when Ashley had suggested she use his first name, but John Gable's manner made one feel instantly inclined to be gracious. He had an inborn gentility. She felt obliged to add her own regrets to Rennie's that Ashley wasn't there to greet him.

To her surprise he laughed indulgently.

"Oh, don't fret yourself about it, my dear. It's typical of the man, as you'll find out. If someone is in trouble, he'll be the first to offer help. Don't let his arrogant exterior fool you—he's as soft as butter inside. I know Ashley too well."

"You have the advantage of me there, of course," she said succinctly.

"Yes." John looked at her thoughtfully. "I'm sorry about all the cloak and dagger stuff, Corinne, but you see the necessity for it, don't you? I mean, what young woman in her right mind would answer an advertisement for someone seeking a wife? Ashley wanted someone intelligent and sensible enough to weigh up the advantages on either side and come to a decision without being dazzled by the thought of monetary gain or an amorous attachment coming into it. Though financially you will benefit, of course."

He looked at her a moment and added gravely, "Don't ever expect him to fall in love with you, Corinne. He's done with all that since his wife's accident."

She felt a lump in her throat. Had he loved her so much that he had nothing left to give to anyone else?

"She drowned, I believe?" she murmured. He looked at her sharply. "Rennie told me when I asked. No other details than that."

His voice was clipped when he answered. "She did. And if she had been a more responsible kind of person it would never have happened. Taking out a sailboat without proper knowledge of the sea and all its moods is something we don't take very kindly to in Cornish waters. Ashley was never fond of boating, and you'll have discovered by now that horses are his passion." He turned the conversation neatly away from Fleur, and yet not so far as she had imagined, she realized. "It's because of the drowning in a way, that he's so determined to start this riding school, because of the young foolhardies who don't give proper attention to safety when they jump in the saddle. He's a great believer in proper teaching, is Ashley, a very caring man, and I hope you'll come to appreciate that in the future."

There was a hint of a smile in his voice now as he touched the soft tendrils of hair at her temple, covering the doctor's bandage. She was one of the young foolhardies, she realized.

"Can I show you this document we've drawn up, Corinne?" John asked. "You will know all the relevant facts by now, of course, about the grandmother's eightieth birthday party, and the reason Ashley wishes to take you as his wife. Frankly, I wonder how the lady has lasted this long, for she is in very frail health, and cannot live much longer. I do not think your contract will be a lengthy one."

"Why go to all this trouble?" she had

to ask him the question. "Why not pass someone off as his wife? And the style in which he lives, John. Does he really need his grandmother's money so badly?"

"My dear, don't be deceived by what you see around you. He has enormous death taxes to pay from his father's death. This house is mortgaged up to the hilt, and the income from the estate is a pittance. He loves Merrowporth and its land the way a man loves a woman, and it would kill him to give it up. As for the suggestion of passing someone off as his wife—it just wouldn't be on for him, Corinne. He's a very proud man, and however the marriage came about, he intends to go to his grandmother's home in Italy and present her with the woman on his arm as his wife, and know that it's the truth. He's a complex character, my dear, but a sincere one."

She felt her mouth tremble as she listened to him. It all made a kind of sense. She could see that in Ashley's mind the lessons given at his riding school would be a sort of restitution for Fleur's death. It wouldn't bring her back, but it would stop some young idiots from cracking their heads and nearly killing themselves the way she had today. No wonder he'd been so angry.

By the time Ashley came back from the outlying farms on the estate, John had gone over the document in fine detail. After Ashley's grandmother's death, either one of them could express a desire to have the marriage dissolved, and John would see to the rest.

What did she have to lose after all, she asked herself when the four of them were seated around the fireplace after tea? It would be an interesting experience . . . the traveling, the sharing in a way of life that was new and different . . . she let herself think no further about the complications that could arise if she let her heart rule her head. She hadn't so far. Why should she start now?

John suggested that they should attend to their little bit of business before he went back to Truro and she found herself adding her signature to the other three. In a somewhat shaky hand, knowing that this time she couldn't retract her word, and feeling rather as if she was selling her soul.

It was arranged that Ashley would drive her back to her apartment and help her collect all her belongings the next day. They were to be married in ten days' time, and that would give them several weeks to get to know each other before they went to Italy.

"The following day we'll go into Truro to see the registrar," Ashley told her. "And we'll have to see about your new passport afterward. Then you'd better see about some clothes. And your engagement and wedding rings mustn't be overlooked."

She was quite sure nothing would be overlooked. He reeled off the things that had to be done with the precision of a general mustering his troops for battle. Finally, she dared to ask with mock timidity if she had any say at all in these matters.

"Of course you do." He gave her the benefit of his brilliant smile. "I'm merely trying to make things easy for you, Corinne."

"Are you planning a reception or anything after the wedding?" she asked. "I'd rather not, in the circumstances, but if our marriage is supposed to be authentic, won't your friends expect to be invited for a drink at least?"

"All taken care of, my sweet," he informed her. "Rennie has been compiling a list of people you should meet, and there'll be a small buffet supper on the evening of our wedding day. It'll be your first chance to show off your acting ability—playing the part of the blushing bride, Corinne."

His bantering tone suddenly angered her.

"You've got it all going your way, haven't you? Even down to the guest list! What about me? Isn't it going to look pretty one-sided if I don't even have one single person of my acquaintance to wish me good luck?"

## LOVE—A FRAGILE THING

*by Ruby Phillipy*

*As love evolves much like a butterfly,*
*It bursts from its lone chrysalis to wing*
*Through new-found ways—a gentle,*
*living thing—*
*When love is drawn to heart with*
*whispered sigh.*
*In love-borne moments brushing softly by,*
*Untamed and free in their awakening,*
*They ride the winds where dreams are*
*beckoning*
*To common goals that strengthen each*
*fine tie.*

*Take care that love is not too tightly held,*
*To bruise its fragile wings; each tender soul*
*Needs room to breathe, and time alone*
*can weld*
*A shielding bond. As each one fills a role,*
*Two well-matched hearts are sealed as one*
*to meld*
*Into the love that was ordained as whole.*

"Friends, you mean," he said slowly.

"Well, yes." Not that she had many, and they were mostly acquaintances rather than friends. She was really only making a stand, because in the last couple of years she'd been happy in temporary jobs, moving about the country so she didn't have time to make close friendships. "And I do have an elderly aunt in Yorkshire."

He was suddenly gripping her arm, his voice full of annoyance.

"No dependents, remember? That was part of the bargain. I don't want some misty-eyed auntie coming down here in a few months' time and demanding to know why I've broken her niece's heart!"

"Don't flatter yourself. Anyway, Aunt Jessie's not a dependent. She's a perfectly capable old lady living in a small village that would grind to a halt without her. I doubt very much whether she'd make the journey down here for a register-office-wedding anyway, since she'd probably think it wasn't even legal or something. But I would like to tell her of the fact, if I have your permission!" She spoke with heavy sarcasm.

It was lost on him. He glared at her with a frown between his eyes. Just as if she'd deceived him by not telling him about her aunt, she thought in exasperation. Ashley, the great deceiver . . . who obviously didn't like getting caught up in his own game.

"I suppose that's all right," he said grudgingly. "She has a right to know, as long as you don't tell her the truth of it. No sense in worrying her, is there? And that's the lot, is it? One old auntie? No friends you want to ask for the wedding supper?"

"One ex-boyfriend doesn't count, I suppose." She saw his jawline tighten and added quickly, "And before you ask, he's got himself engaged to somebody else. A company director's daughter, no less, so there's no danger of him turning up." She couldn't quite hide the touch of bitterness creeping into her voice.

"I'm sorry, Corinne," Ashley put a warm hand over hers for an instant, clearly thinking she was still eating her heart out over her ex-boyfriend. Well, let him think it, she thought.

"I think we'll call it a day, shall we?" he said suddenly. "I'd like to make an early start in the morning if we're to clear your place and get back in one day. You say it's furnished, though, so it's only clothes and personal bits and pieces?"

"That's right. I've never been the acquisitive type. It'll only take an hour or so to see to everything. I'll have to see the landlady, and no doubt she'll want a month's rent in lieu of proper notice."

"Don't worry about that." He suddenly leaned over and kissed her. "Just practicing! We shan't fool anybody if we don't appear reasonably affectionate toward each other. Good night, Corinne."

It didn't take long to get everything settled at her apartment and her belongings loaded into Ashley's car. She felt a bit like a kept woman when he insisted on paying the landlady, but at last they were on the road again and heading southwest.

He swore softly as a car shot across the lights in front of him. He hated to be beaten in anything, she thought.

"Anyway, we haven't even begun the game yet, have we?" he said softly.

"What particular little game would that be?"

"The happily married couple."

"I don't recall agreeing to *that* . . . there's no need to overdo it—"

"You didn't disagree!"

She thought she'd made it perfectly clear to him, but he was the complete male chauvinist, thinking she would fall under his spell from the merest quirk of his eyebrows. Two could play at that game, she thought. She could also turn on the sweetness and light . . . but she knew it would be a dangerous pastime where he was concerned, and one she wasn't sure she could handle.

"Over there!" He brought the car to a halt at the side of the road near a small coffeehouse. "Will this do, or did you expect the Ritz?" His eyes mocked her, and her own flashed back at him angrily.

"Once and for all, Ashley, I am not a gold-digger," she told him shortly. "All I did was to apply for a job that I thought sounded intriguing, remember? I certainly didn't ask to be brought into all this, so if you want me to go through with it, you must accept me as I am. And that certainly includes being far more used to eating in coffeehouses than the Ritz."

She opened the car door, slammed it behind her and stalked toward the coffeehouse. Damn him, she was seething. And damn his ability to needle her all the time. If he wanted her, he'd better start treating her with respect.

She was suddenly hauled around to face him, his hand digging into her arm. She glared into his furious face.

"Don't ever do that again," he said tightly. "Walking out on anybody is childish and unnecessary, and if I upset you by my choice of words, then I apologize. I certainly didn't mean to offend you, and neither did I expect you to react like some touchy little hothouse plant."

It was about the worst apology she'd ever heard, but they could hardly stand here glaring at each other all day. Besides, she was very hungry, her hunger accentuated by the way the sparks that flew between them were getting the adrenalin going inside her.

"I accept your apology," she said icily. "But please remember that the little document we signed yesterday doesn't come into operation until after the wedding. It can't be dissolved until there's something to dissolve, and I don't have the ring on my finger yet—or through my nose."

She swept inside the door of the coffeehouse before he could answer this last barb, and found a table near the window where a waitress was already hovering with a menu. Corinne's face was hot from their heated words, and she took the menu quickly, chattering to the waitress to avoid looking at him as he followed her to the table and took his place opposite her. They each ordered politely, and when they were alone, he forced her to look at him, speaking softly, his anger gone.

"All right, Corinne, you win this little round. You still have the upper hand, don't you?" He reached out and took her hand in his own, his long, sensitive fingers caressing it gently. "I suppose I've been more concerned with getting this show on the road, if you'll forgive the expression, than considering the delicate nature of the transaction. You have every right to expect slightly more than the impersonal boss/secretary relationship, and I assure you it will be no hardship. In fact it will give me great pleasure."

He suddenly raised her upturned palm to his lips and kissed it. She almost snatched it away as the waitress came back to the table with a pot of tea and a plate of thin bread and butter. Oh, God, this wasn't what she wanted! If he was going to start wooing her, to use one of Aunt Jessie's old-fashioned phrases, she wasn't sure how far her resistance was going to stand up to it. It would be better for them to remain sparring partners than pseudolovers, wouldn't it?

Rennie had been busy while they were away. Over a welcome cup of tea in the lounge, she showed them the invitation cards she'd bought that morning.

"We shall have to send them out immediately after you've approved the list of guests," Rennie said. She smiled apologetically at Corinne. "I'm sorry to rush you, love, but if the wedding is to be soon. . . "

"It's all right, Rennie. I just feel as if I've jumped on a merry-go-round and I keep thinking of all the things that could trip us up. Things Ashley and I should know about each other, like our birthdays, and his favorite food and drink. . . . Oh, and the embarrassment I'm going to feel if these guests at our 'wedding reception' turn up with presents! I shall feel as if I'm taking them under false pretences, which is exactly the truth, isn't it? I'm getting cold feet. . . "

"Darling, everything will be all right!" Ashley had come quickly to her side. He moved one long finger to caress the side of her cheek. Surely all this wasn't necessary for Rennie's benefit, she thought dizzily.

"Do you think I haven't thought about all those things—and more?" he went on. "I know it's asking a lot of you, which is why I had to choose the right person for the role of my wife. I knew as soon as I saw you that you would be able to carry it off, Corinne. There was no question in my mind of looking further."

It was just flattery, she told herself, but there was such a note of sincerity in his voice that she glowed inside.

"All right," her voice was almost gay. "Let's prove to the world what accomplished actors we are."

"Then that's settled," Rennie said with satisfaction. "And don't forget I have to act my part as well, so don't go and shut yourselves off like two lovebirds to learn all the relevant details of your past and present, will you? Not all the time anyway."

"It's a lovely thought," Ashley grinned. "But we'll try and spare you a little of our time, Ren."

The way he said it made the two of them sound a little like conspirators, Corinne thought. She yawned suddenly.

"Can we fetch my belongings in before I fall asleep?" she said to Ashley. He agreed and Rennie said she would start preparing dinner.

"Ashley, tell me something," she began, when they were walking out to the car together. "You said something about some little Italian upstart—Georgio, I think you called him—having some claim to your grandmother's money when she dies. I'd like to know more about him—and why it's not perfectly possible that she'll divide the money between you in her will."

"I'd like to know more about him too," he said grimly. "I only know what her companion wrote to me when I—and my wife—were invited for the birthday celebrations. The companion is English, so maybe she has some peculiarly patriotic idea of seeing that justice is done on my behalf. Anyway, she mentioned Georgio as turning up some months ago and claiming to be the son of my mother's younger sister, who was the black sheep of the family. The women in my family were Italian, the men English—a strange quirk of fate that followed into the second generation."

And probably accounted for his dark good looks, that she could appreciate were slightly foreign, and also his hot temper and mercurial change of moods.

"Your grandmother would probably have liked you to marry an Italian girl then," she said.

"Probably. But I marry whom I please. . . ."

"Yes, Ashley," she said meekly. A grin lightened his stern expression. "Go on about this Georgio, please. Why shouldn't she change her will in his favor?"

"Why shouldn't she indeed? Who am I, after all, but a stranger she's hardly seen over the years? One who never keeps in touch by letter or visits. Nor did I see it necessary to kowtow to an old woman I didn't really know for the sake of her money. Until now."

"And what made you change your mind?" she said, puzzled.

"A lot of things," he said briefly. "The sudden realization that Merrowporth could be crumbling in front of my eyes within ten or twenty years—the obsession with the riding school and the fact that this part of Cornwall is crying out for someone with capital to provide such a service—the fact that no Italian playboy is going to do me out of what's mine. Not again."

The last two words were said almost beneath his breath, but she just managed to hear them as he leaned into the trunk of the car and brought out her suitcases. She decided not to pursue them.

"But didn't you write and let your grandmother know of your wife's death?" she persisted. It seemed the most natural thing to do. He slammed down the lid of the boot.

"No, I didn't," he snapped. "And that's enough questions for one afternoon. Can you manage those smaller boxes, or shall I make two trips for them?"

"I can manage," she said quickly. She followed him up the steps of the house, for the life of her unable to understand just why he wouldn't have informed his grandmother of his wife's death. It hadn't occurred to her until now. There was suddenly something sinister about it.

He was in her room before her, dumping her cases on the floor. Suddenly she wanted to see the smile back on his face and to experience the lightness between them again.

"Ashley, I'm sorry," she said helplessly. "It's just that I must know certain things. We both know that if I'm to succeed as your—your wife—your past can't be a closed book to me, can it?"

He stared thoughtfully into her eyes and slowly he nodded and drew her into his arms. She could feel the warmth of him through his shirt and thin jacket, and it was a comforting feeling.

"I'm the only one who should be saying sorry," he said grudgingly. "I get you down here under a false pretext, practically order you to be my wife with little or no explanation, and expect you to accept it all quite complacently.

"Yet, if you did accept it all without question, you'd hardly be the woman I need. I don't want some little cabbage who questions nothing. The woman for me must have an inquiring mind, be intelligent, beautiful, adaptable . . . a tall order . . . almost impossible to believe one could actually find the right person. . . ."

He stared at her, while her breath caught in her throat. He was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before . . . as if he was meeting the truth head-on, really needing her . . . as if all the games were over, and only a glorious reality lay ahead. And that was absurd, of course, because she knew he had no more time for women.

"Well, my beautiful girl?" he said softly.

◆

*Love maketh a wit of a fool.*

Charles Dibdin
The Quaker

◆

She forced an amused laugh to her throat. "Well, Ashley," she said lightly. "If this is an example of your acting ability, I don't think we shall have much trouble fooling people. You almost had me fooled there for a minute."

His eyes darkened as he stared at her. He didn't move or speak immediately. When he did there was a challenge in his voice.

"All right then. But remember one thing. Our marriage may be an arranged one, but deny if you can there's an attraction between us. I'm just wondering who'll be the first to succumb to all that it implies, and whether it'll be worth taking a little bet on it!"

Corinne felt her heart thump. For a second she was furious, but it might be amusing to tease him a little, too, just to see if the hard and arrogant Ashley Jay was as immune to feminine charms as he liked to think.

She looked up at him provocatively. "Do you really think I'll be the one to come to you?" she said teasingly.

Her mouth was half-parted as she looked up at him, her eyes inviting without her realizing it, and the next second he had pushed her away from him. She blinked at the sudden change in him and saw the hardness creep into his expression. With a sudden expression of distaste he snapped at her.

"Be very sure of yourself, Corinne," he said tightly. "I'm made of flesh and blood, and though I choose to suppress it, there's an Italian strain running through me that demands satisfaction from a challenge." He looked contemptuously at the locked door between their two rooms. "If you're so sure of yourself, why don't you throw that key away? I assure you I shan't come through the door unless I'm invited."

He twisted on his heel and strode off, leaving her in the middle of the room, still startled at his changing moods. It was all ridiculous, she thought angrily. They were putting themselves in an impossible position by this stupid bet of his. Neither of them really wanted the relationship to go further than the marriage of convenience he had suggested, and it was crazy to think of it developing into anything more.

But she felt a crawling anxiety inside her, because it was difficult to be strong-willed when someone was determined to bend your will to theirs, and part of you wanted desperately to succumb. She was suddenly afraid, knowing the dangerous enchantment she felt whenever he was around, and knew instinctively they could be heading for disaster.

Corinne gave a great deal of thought to the letter she wrote to Aunt Jessie. Her aunt would never sanction the kind of marriage she was contemplating, and she knew she must word every bit of it carefully to arouse no suspicion in the old lady's mind. Before dinner that evening, she reread the neatly written pages.

"I know it will come as a great surprise to you, Aunt Jessie," she'd said, "but when you meet Ashley, I know you'll realize how impossible it was for me to refuse him. It was a case of love at first sight—and don't tell me I haven't known him long enough to know, because when you fall in love so totally and unquestioningly time becomes irrelevant. I know all I need to know about him. He's attractive and dynamic, very forceful and determined, and with a smile that will charm you as it does me. All that, and he loves me, too. We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other properly, so I hope you'll give us your blessing, Aunt Jessie, and don't feel cheated because it's not going to be a white lace and orange-blossom affair."

When she went downstairs, she took the unsealed envelope with her, and explained what she had been doing. She looked dubiously at Ashley.

"Perhaps you'd like to see the letter?"

"My dear girl, I don't want to censor your mail," he said in amusement. "I'm sure you managed to convey exactly the right tone to allay any suspicions on your aunt's part that I may have abducted you and forced you into white slavery!"

"It's not that," she said calmly. "I think I should have your approval on what I've said in case you happen to meet her some day. Our stories ought to tally, shouldn't they?"

She spoke quickly as she saw his frown, and he took the letter from her. Aunt Jessie was a pretty shrewd character, she thought, but so was Ashley, and he'd be sure to point out any flaws she may have overlooked in her anxiety. Remembering how she'd professed herself so madly in love with him and that he loved her too, she felt her face reddening as he read it through with a half-smile touching his mouth.

"Excellent," he handed it back. "If I was your aunt, reading as a third party, I wouldn't fail to be moved by your eloquence. You became quite poetic when you enthused over the allure of Cornwall and Merrowporth in particular. A good thing you persisted in your avowal of undying love, or she might have thought you were marrying me for my money."

He gave her a sardonic smile.

"According to you, you don't have any," she whipped back. "Though this is hardly a lifestyle that survives without it."

"I never said I was penniless, merely that I intend to have what's rightfully mine," he said stiffly.

Their eyes clashed. Money-grabber, each of them said silently.

Rennie came bustling into the room with the heated dinner trolley, unaware of the sudden tension between them.

"We should get down to business tonight," she declared. "There's no time to waste if we're all to be word-perfect, and besides, I'm interested to know more about you, Corinne." She smiled warmly at Corinne.

"There's only Aunt Jessie," Corinne said. "She's my mother's aunt, really, so she's quite elderly but very sprightly. I lived with her in Yorkshire after my parents died when I was twelve."

She looked down, knowing the unwelcome images would come seeping into her mind at mentioning her parents. "My father was an advisor with a big construction company. They were having problems with some faulty metal used in the building of a tall apartment house. My mother was quite ill at the time with influenza, and when he was called to the site to make a decision, he was torn between staying with her and his duty to the firm. Being the kind of man he was, it wasn't easy, and his deputy could have gone. But my mother urged him not to be silly and stay behind on her account, and that the full report must come from him if peoples' lives were in danger. So, of course, he went to the site—and he was on one of the inspection cages when the whole place collapsed like a deck of cards."

"Oh, my dear." Rennie's voice was hushed with shock. Corinne went on as if she hadn't heard her, her eyes clouded with pain and remembered horror that was still vivid in her mind after thirteen years.

"My mother just never got over it," she said thickly. "Without Dad she had no purpose in her life. The sun had gone out of it, and there was nothing to fight for."

"She had you."

"If you'd known them, Rennie, you'd understand. They were so—so good together. Oh, I don't mean they neglected me or anything. I had a loving childhood, but I was always aware that theirs was a special relationship that excluded even me. It's something you're not often privileged to see, but once you have, any other kind of relationship appears shallow in comparison. Anyway, as I said, my mother didn't put up much of a fight to get well. She went to Dad's funeral still weak from influenza, contracted pneumonia, and died a week after he did, and I went to live with Aunt Jessie. End of story."

There was a small silence, and suddenly Ashley spoke. He'd sat silently all the time she was talking, but now he came around the table and poured her a glass of sparkling wine, pressing his hand briefly on her shoulder.

"My poor Corinne. That was a cruel lesson to learn at twelve years old."

"Yes. But it taught me never to expect too much from other people, at least while I was in my most formative years. I've mellowed a little since then, I think." She smiled crookedly. "I still try to stick to one golden rule, though—always to keep a little of yourself in reserve for the buffeting life hands out. That way you never get irrevocably hurt. There's always a thin straw left to cling to."

"My God," Ashley commented. "I didn't realize you were such a philosopher, Corinne. What other facets of your character should I know?"

His sudden flippancy annoyed her. If she had known him better, she would have realized it hid his true feelings and a sudden urge to fold her in his arms and comfort her and tell her not to worry, and that she need never feel lost or lonely again now that he was here to take care of her. As usual he hid his emotions under remarks that irritated her for his apparent lack of understanding.

"You know about all you're entitled to know," she said coldly.

"Let's take our coffee into the lounge," Rennie broke into the small electric silence as the tension between them grew.

"I feel rather like a new girl in front of the school board." Corinne tried to keep her voice light as she followed Rennie out of the dining room. "Confessing all my past! Hadn't you better fill me in a little about your backgrounds, too?"

She had the feeling Ashley would

rather skip that part of it, but how could he? As soon as other people became involved—her aunt, his friends at the reception, the visit to his Italian grandmother, even the local doctor—they would betray their scheme unless they knew each other's backgrounds.

"You know most of it." Ashley's voice was brusque, his eyes coldly remote. "I've told you about my hopes for the riding school and the renovation of the house before it falls apart. You know my reasons for asking you to marry me. I'm thirty-two years old, in my right mind, and have all my own teeth. What else is there to know?"

"Oh, take no notice of him, Corinne," Rennie said. "He's a typically arrogant male—the take-me-as-you-find-me-I'm-perfect variety."

Corinne laughed. "I agree. But what about you, Rennie? Have you never married?"

"I never found a man I fancied enough yet, my love," she said cheerfully. "I prefer to keep house here and be my own boss, even though Ashley thinks he rules the roost, like they all do."

"Okay, we'll call it a day," Ashley said crisply. "Since you two are determined to discuss me as if I wasn't here. Let's take a look at that guest list, Ren, and see who I can cross off!"

"It's a wonder you have any friends at all," she said tartly. "I've kept it reasonably short—about a dozen of us in all, unless you wanted to make it a more flamboyant affair."

"I do not. The fewer the better, though a dozen seems a nice round number. Corinne won't know many of them—she met Stephanie and a couple of the blokes, and Doc, of course, and John."

She'd have preferred it if the predatory Stephanie had been left off the list, though she was hardly in a position to say so.

"I don't see John Gable's name on the list," she commented, as she read through the list Ashley handed her to read. Most of the names were unfamiliar, of course.

He and Rennie will be the witnesses," Ashley told her. "Are you sure there's no one you want to invite, Corinne?"

"No," she shook her head. "I've told Aunt Jessie in my letter she's more than welcome, but I can't really see her making the long journey."

Anyway, she felt, with a growing conviction, that in this strange new life on which she was about to embark for however brief a period of her life, perhaps it would be best not to try to connect her past with her future too definitely. There was absolutely no point in deluding herself that her marriage would be more than an interlude in her life.

The days flew by so fast until the wedding, she could hardly believe it. They drove into Truro and saw the registrar, organized her passport, bought her a wide, faceted wedding ring and a new wardrobe of clothes suitable for the Italian holiday. Corinne protested it was unnecessary for him to buy so much, but Ashley insisted, saying it was part of the bargain, and his words stung her into silence. Reminding her that he wanted her to do him justice, since he was paying the price for a beautiful accessory to complement him to this grandmother's home.

Ashley also bought her a beautiful engagement ring a few days before the wedding. He insisted she have one, but she couldn't bring herself to have diamonds, partly because it seemed even more deceitful to wear the stones that a dewy-eyed fiancée would choose and partly because they'd always seemed cold and brittle to her.

"I'd prefer an amethyst," she told him. "It's such a lovely, warm stone, and my birthstone."

"It would be," he said drily. "All right, my sweet, an amethyst it shall be."

The morning of the wedding, when she was brushing her gleaming hair into soft curls on her shoulders, her hands trembled a little. This time tomorrow, the thought whispered inside her, I shall be truly his wife, for whatever reason and for whatever motive, and it was the one thing on earth she most desired to be. She looked at her luminous hazel eyes in the mirror, fringed by the sweep of dark lashes, and the love she had tried in vain to deny stared back at her, nakedly obvious in her reflected image. In her cream silk dress, with the demure Victorian ruffled collar and cuffs, she looked vulnerable, a little afraid, yet with a semblance of unabashed hope inside her. Her wedding day . . . for better or worse . . . and in a way, the strangest day of her life.

A tap on the door made her start, and she called out, "Come in." Ashley entered the room, remote and devastatingly handsome in a formal light blue suit and snowy shirt, a gray silk tie and matching handkerchief adding a touch of elegance. His dark hair was smoothed and shining, and for a few seconds he surveyed her gravely through enigmatic eyes. Then the sensual smile that could send her pulses leaping spread across his mouth and he walked toward her, a corsage of flowers in his hand.

"You look so stunning you take my breath away," he said softly. "I give you my profuse apologies that I couldn't get daffodils for you in September, but at least the coloring's right, and I persuaded the florist to tuck in a few sprays of wild honeysuckle for luck."

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure at the unexpected gesture. The corsage was made up of button chrysanthemums in vibrant golden yellow, and the heady scent of the honeysuckle tucked in among them permeated her senses.

"It's beautiful," she said breathlessly. "Thank you."

He moved across to her in a couple of strides, and without saying a word he pinned the flowers in position on her dress. She suddenly knew by the slight shaking of his fingers that no matter how much he liked to pretend otherwise, he wasn't entirely immune to her and never would be.

It was a heady realization, as sweet as the scent of honeysuckle drifting up between them. He tipped her chin upward with one finger, and his other arm slid around her, pulling her close.

"Happy wedding day, my lovely girl," he murmured, and then he touched his lips to her mouth, a lingering, unpressured kiss that touched her deeply.

"Time we were leaving." His voice changed, became more remote as if this was the business transaction it had started out to be. He caught hold of her hand and led her out of the room, down the stairs to where Rennie was waiting for them, smart and chic in a pink boucle suit, her expression approving.

"You look—so right—together." She gave a little sigh as her sentimental streak took over for a moment. "Oh—there's a greetings telegram for you, Corinne. It arrived a few minutes ago."

Corinne tore open the envelope. It was from Aunt Jessie.

"Be happy," it commanded, and it wished her and Ashley "love and luck always."

It choked her a little to read it aloud, in the same way she'd been affected when Aunt Jessie's wedding present had arrived a few days ago, a bale of bedding topped by a white and gold continental quilt and matching pillow cases, all ordered and dispatched gift-wrapped in silver wedding paper from a big department store in York.

"It must have cost her a fortune," Corinne had said, feeling horribly guilty and touched at the same time by her aunt's generosity, coupled with the apologetic note to say she couldn't make the long journey south, but that she'd be with them both in spirit.

With the next post had come a slim box, also gift-wrapped, addressed to Corinne alone, and also from Aunt Jessie. It contained a beautiful silky negligee and nightgown set in pure white. She'd opened it unthinkingly in front of Ashley and Rennie, and had gasped with mingled delight and embarrassment when she realized, too late, what the box contained.

"Well!" Ashley's grin spread right across his face. "Maybe I should meet this sprightly aunt of yours one day."

"It's really lovely, Corinne," Rennie said quickly, seeing her embarrassment at the implications of the gift, obviously meant as part of a bride's trousseau.

"But hardly appropriate in the circumstances," she murmured.

"Why not? Why shouldn't you have lovely things to wear the same as any other bride?" Rennie went on.

"Because I'm not like any other bride, and it suddenly feels more like cheating than anything else, knowing Aunt Jessie's spent her money on me like this," she said with a sudden catch in her breath. It had never got through to her so sharply before, but that was exactly how it felt right now.

Ashley interrupted her thoughts. "Time we were going, Corinne."

It was a surprisingly reverent occasion, with the registrar a tall, fatherly figure intoning the words with all the solemnity of a vicar. The small room used for weddings was set up rather like a small chapel, tastefully decorated with vases of flowers, and Rennie and John Gable were attentive witnesses as Ashley slid the gold ring on her finger and held it there for a few moments until it was all over.

At the registrar's smiling instruction, Ashley bent his head and kissed her. It was a kiss without emotion, and she moved almost dazedly to the small table to sign the certificate that made it all legal. And then she walked out into the sunlight with her new husband as if she was still dreaming. It had really happened, she thought, with a sudden surge of panic . . . and in the space of ten minutes, she had become Ashley Jay's wife.

For the reception that evening, Corinne wore a long dress of clinging silk in an unusual shade of pale apricot. It looked wonderful with her coloring, and Ashley told her so. He looked wonderful, too, she thought, with a leap of pleasure inside her. He took both her hands in his own, and she felt the sudden racing of her heart as he smiled deep into her eyes and kissed her lips very lightly.

"My beautiful bride," he murmured. "How am I going to be able to resist you tonight, and all the other nights of our life together?"

He couldn't quite keep the mocking note out of his voice, reminding her instantly that this was no ordinary marriage, no matter how it may appear to outsiders.

"You'd better try then, hadn't you?" she said flippantly. "I've always thought you prided yourself on your self-control."

His smile didn't falter except for a tightening of the muscles in his jaw.

"Let's meet our guests, shall we, darling?" He turned tauntingly to answer the insistent ringing of the doorbell.

Ashley among his friends was a different person, she realized. He changed from the rather brooding man she sometimes saw to the newly-attentive husband. Always at her side, drinking in the compliments showered on her appearance as if he was truly delighted by his friends' approval.

Doc Masters was easy, known to all as Doc because he loathed the name Arnold, bequeathed to him by a legendary uncle; Vince and Wally she had already met; a married couple called Ruth and Kit; pretty little Shirley hanging on the arm of a tall husky man whose name Corinne never did quite catch . . . several unattached, beautiful people who laughed at all the jokes and flirted with Rennie and complimented her on the excellence of her buffet . . . John Gable, of course, smiling like a kindly Dutch Uncle at everyone . . . and Stephanie.

* * *

*One pulse of passion—youth's first fiery glow,—*
*Is worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage;*
*Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy;*
*Have we not lips to kiss with,*
*hearts to love,*
*and eyes to see?*

Oscar Wilde
*Panthea*

She was resplendent in a scarlet evening gown that skimmed her shape, arriving late so that she made an entrance that could only be described as superb. She smiled all around the room very slowly and deliberately and then glided straight across to Ashley and wound her arms around his neck in a drift of exotic perfume.

"Congratulations, darling," she breathed the words in his ear. "I hope you'll be very happy with your little wife."

Corinne was near enough to know the words were meant for her to hear, and meant as an insult, and she kept deliberately calm. In no way was she going to let Stephanie think she was succeeding in humiliating her. She threaded her arm though Ashley's as he laughingly extricated himself from Stephanie's clinging embrace, and smiled into the other girl's eyes sweetly.

"Oh, he will," she said innocently. "Please don't worry about Ashley and me, Stephanie."

There was a momentary flash of anger in the other girl's eyes. Corinne knew at once that she'd wanted him for herself, and no doubt she was livid at the thought of a stranger appearing out of nowhere and marrying him so quickly . . . and the fact that Ashley suddenly seemed aware of the antagonism between the two of them and was amused by it, gave Corinne a sudden feeling of recklessness.

Let Stephanie and the rest of them think what they liked about the circumstances . . . this was her wedding day, and she was married to the best-looking man in the room and in her new home. It was her domain after all.

She laughed right into Stephanie's face, and then reached on tiptoe to kiss Ashley on the mouth.

"I thought you said something about dancing, darling. Isn't it the custom for the bride and groom to lead the rest of them on to the dancefloor? I can keep you all to myself a little longer then, before all these other lovely ladies claim a share in you."

He looked startled for an instant, but responded immediately as someone attended to the music, and the smooth strains of a ballad filled the room. Somebody turned out the lights, so there was only the dusky blue of twilight from the window to light the room, and the harshness of colors and laughter was suddenly muted, softened by shadows, newly intimate. And while the guests stood around the room, drinking and chatting, Ashley held out his arms to her, and she went into them, hardly noticing that she gave a little sigh as she did so.

He held her very close, challenging her to resist with every shuffling movement they made around the floor. But how could she? She had let herself in for this, and she reminded herself it would have looked very odd for the bride and groom not to have started off the dancing. She kept telling herself it was all for effect, and that he was only holding her so closely because it was expected of them, to further the impression of the happy couple. And with an inflated ego like Ashley's, he'd want her to appear starry-eyed and head over heels in love with him . . . she stumbled a little in his arms, and he held her tighter.

"Steady, darling." His voice was full of suppressed laughter as he whispered in her ear. "This isn't quite as impersonal as you intended it to be, is it?"

"Dancing wasn't meant to be impersonal," she said as coolly as she could.

"You can say that again," he breathed in her ear. "I never could see much sense in all that disco dancing. You might as well be dancing completely on your own if you can't even hold a girl in your arms."

She felt his hands move slowly up and down her back, and flinched away from the sudden contact. She tried desperately to think of something scathing to say about him taking advantage of the darkness, but before she could think of it there was a sudden loud cheer, and the brightness stabbed into her eyes as the music ended, and someone turned on the lights again.

She felt suddenly exposed in the middle of the room, still held tightly in his arms. She'd been lulled by the wine and the feeling of isolation from everyone else; cocooned in another world as she floated on a cloud in his arms, feeling as if she was suspended in time, with no yesterday, no tomorrow, only now, when she belonged to him and he to her . . . suddenly reality had intruded; the spell was broken; the enchantment gone . . .

"Come on, Ashley, you've got plenty of time for all that," Doc called out jocularly. "Give the rest of us a chance to dance with the beautiful Mrs. Jay."

It was so unreal to know that the name referred to her . . . as the music changed to a livelier tune she found herself clasped in Doc's eager arms and twisted and twirled enthusiastically around the room. The other guests crowded on to the floor behind them. The spell was broken . . . but at least it gave Corinne time to get herself together properly, and to chat fairly sensibly whenever Doc allowed her to draw breath from the dancing. She certainly didn't want to dance with Ashley again, she thought angrily, knowing that she was hardly going to be able to avoid it. But there wasn't going to be a repetition of the embarrassment she had felt before, she vowed. She would make very sure of that.

The party showed no sign of breaking up early, to Corinne's relief. She wanted to be tired enough by the time she went to bed to forget this was her wedding night. The dancing slowed down as the night progressed, and she opted out whenever she could, protesting that her feet ached.

Corinne glanced around. All the guests seemed to be enjoying themselves. She wandered about, smiling and chatting, until she managed to slip unobtrusively out of the room to get a breath of air. Once outside in the shrubbery near the house, she took deep, welcome breaths of the scented air, fragrant with wild honeysuckle. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, drinking in the heady perfume . . . and then she suddenly froze, as another, unmistakable musky perfume rose to her nostrils, and she heard Stephanie's angry, brittle voice. Corinne was hot with embarrassment, realizing Stephanie must be out here with a man, and she moved back quickly into the shadows of the house as footsteps approached, since she couldn't go back inside without them seeing her.

"I don't know what possessed you to do it, and if you expected me to fade quietly into the background as soon as she appeared. . . ."

"No one would ever imagine you doing that, Steph." Corinne heard Ashley's amused voice with a shock that made her feel physically sick. Not for the world would she have wanted to eavesdrop on this, she thought wildly.

"You know what people around here are saying, don't you?" Stephanie's voice was scathing. "That you married her on the rebound because of what Fleur—"

"Leave Fleur out of it, will you?" There was a steely note in Ashley's voice now. "And we won't discuss my marriage, if you don't mind. It's really none of your business, is it, Stephanie?"

The voices and the footsteps moved away, so that Corinne didn't hear how she reacted to this. The scene had left her shaken and after a few minutes trying to compose herself she went into the house by a side door and into the kitchen. Rennie was standing by the electric cooker, waiting for a saucepan of milk to come to the boil.

"Goodness, you gave me a fright," she smiled, and then caught sight of Corinne's flushed face. "My dear, something's happened—what is it?"

Corinne gave a shaky laugh and without thinking blurted out the conversation she'd overheard.

"I know I'm being oversensitive, but there are things I should know, Rennie. Like the way Fleur died and why Ashley won't even speak of it—and whether there really was anything between him and Stephanie. If I'd thought I was treading on anyone's toes—"

"Well, you certainly aren't as far as that young woman's concerned," Rennie said tartly. "She's probably far more interested in Ashley now that he's out of reach than she was before. She's a born collector, Corinne, only in her case she collects men. She may feel at bit thwarted because you popped up out of the blue and presumably knocked Ashley sideways enough for him to propose, when he'd become more or less a confirmed woman-hater since Fleur. . . ."

She stopped as John Gable poked his head into the kitchen.

"They're all bleating about coffee, and wondering if you've gone off to milk the cow." He smiled teasingly at Rennie. "Can I do anything to help?"

"The milk's just about ready. You can carry one of the trays in, please, John." She glanced at Corinne, who nodded slightly, as if to affirm that she was all right now. But she vowed she would finish this conversation at the first opportunity.

And at last they all left Merrowporth. Rennie closed the door after the last guest with a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness we don't have a wedding every day," she said feelingly. "I couldn't stand the strain. And now I'm off to my bed. There's another day tomorrow to clear up the debris, and for once I'm going to ignore it. Good night to you both."

She kissed each of them with swift embarrassment and went up to her own rooms. There was a sudden little awkward silence, and then Corinne said quickly that she was going to bed, too, as she was nearly dropping with sleep. Her eyes dared him to mock her, but he merely nodded and said he would do the same in a few minutes. She was too tired to wash properly, and she compromised by giving her teeth a quick brush and pressing a cool facecloth to her face, undressing quickly, and crawling between the cotton sheets with an audible sigh.

She was almost asleep, her mind as tired as her body, enabling her to push away the disturbing thought that this night, her wedding night, should have been ending very differently, when she was suddenly tinglingly aware of the adjoining door between her room and Ashley's being opened. Her eyes flew to it, to see him standing there, illuminated in the doorway, the soft light from his bedside lamp revealing the tray of drinks he held in his hand. Her heart began to beat uncomfortably fast in her chest, and she grabbed the blankets tightly under her chin. She heard his soft laugh as he walked unhurriedly across her room. She could see his legs, bare and lean beneath the terrycloth robe he wore. Her tongue felt frozen to the roof of her mouth, but somehow she forced herself to speak in a husky croak.

"What do you want?"

Ashley put the tray down on her bedside table and looked down at her. He stood against the light, so she couldn't see the expression in his eyes. But she could hear the mocking laughter in his voice.

"Is that any way to speak to your brand-new husband on our wedding night?"

"Don't be silly, Ashley—"

"What's silly in wanting to share a glass of champagne with my wife?" he said coolly. He turned to the tray, and while he poured out the two sparkling glasses, she seized the opportunity to reach out for her housecoat and push her arms into the sleeves, pulling it tightly around her body. She knew by the set of his mouth that he must think her a complete little Puritan, and her face burned as she leaned up on one elbow now that she was more decently clad.

"Why are you doing this?" she said huskily. "We made a bargain. . . ."

"So we did. And you're the most beautiful prize I've ever bargained for, in case I haven't always made it obvious to you. Here's to you, my beautiful bride—to us."

He raised his glass and took a deep drink. Nervously, Corinne took a large gulp.

"No strings, you said. A marriage in name only. You have no right. . . ."

"I have a husband's right, remember?" He sat on the edge of the bed and stretched out a hand to touch the silkiness of her hair. She flinched away, spilling her drink, aware of the thudding of her heart.

"Ashley, please go. I'm very tired." Her own voice was jerky. She felt ridiculously near to tears. She drained her glass quickly and handed it to him. To her dismay he had filled it again before she could protest.

"I don't feel like sleeping," he drawled. "I don't get married every day, and I'm not ready to end the day yet. But in the absence of a better offer, I'll settle for talking."

She stared at him helplessly as he sprawled out on her bed. The most unpredictable man. . . .

"What is there to talk about?"

"Oh, come on, Corinne! How long have we known each other? We have all those lost years to catch up on."

"I haven't noticed any eagerness on your part to tell me about your background," she said tartly. "I almost had to drag it out of you, and what you didn't tell me, Rennie. . . ."

She stopped, realizing the champagne was letting her babble on, and that he was looking at her sharply.

"And just what have you and Rennie been talking about that I should know about?"

"Nothing very terrible." It was her turn to be sarcastic. "Just enough so I won't put my foot in it all the time. You already know about my childhood and my parents, and my Aunt Jessie in Yorkshire."

"Those are superficial things—"

"Superficial! They were painful to live through, some of them," she said indignantly.

"That was the wrong word," he said quickly. "I mean, those things happened to you and you couldn't stop them. But I want to know about Corinne, the woman."

She felt her face go hot. "There's nothing to know. I answered your advertisement, so you know the kind of person I am!"

He suddenly leaned forward and kissed her lips lightly.

"Oh, no darling. That's only skimming the surface. There's the elusive boyfriend, for instance. I'm curious to know if he had what it takes to thaw out that ice maiden exterior of yours."

"That's none of your business," she snapped. And the last thing she wanted was to be reminded of Harvey—especially tonight. He laughed softly and moved away from her bed.

"He still has a hold on your emotions, doesn't he?" his voice was crisp. "Just as long as you remember he's part of your past." He took the tray and moved across the room toward his own. "Good night, Corinne. Sleep well."

The door clicked shut. She wilted as if someone had knocked all the stuffing out of her. It was a long time before she slept, but next morning he was cool, saying they'd go riding during the next week, so she'd be reasonably proficient and not break her neck and be a disgrace to him when they went to Italy, where his grandmother had a fine stable of horses. A love of equestrian pursuits was something he and his grandmother had in common, he told her, though the old lady's riding days were long over.

"Perhaps she'll leave you her horses then. Won't that do to start the riding school with the stock you've already got?" She was prickly and sarcastic and unable to push down the apprehension she felt at mounting the gray again.

"You can't feed horses on fresh air," he said curtly. "And there's more to it than just acquiring stock."

"All right. You don't have to convince me, do you? I just have to do as I'm told, don't I?"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Corinne."

She bit her lip. They had to be reasonably affable, she reminded herself, or no one would take them for a happily married couple. They were more like sparring partners. "I'm sorry," she said distantly. "I'm ready whenever you are."

He nodded, as if sensing the small truce, and soon after breakfast they went out to the stables. Now that summer was over, there was no need to keep anyone on except the stableboy, and Corinne could appreciate that the stables were a lot of dead wood, financially, for half the year. A well-run riding school would definitely put them on the map. If Ashley's teaching methods were anything to go by, she thought feelingly, an hour or so later, he would force his pupils to be as skilled as himself. He was a relentless perfectionist. He shouted, cajoled, and swore, and occasionally praised. But by the time they rode back to Merrowporth she was beginning to feel part of the horse, which was exactly the way he had told her she should feel.

"I think I'll have a quick bath before lunch," she grimaced. "I ache in every bone."

"Do that," he said casually. "I shan't see you at lunch, anyway. I promised to call in on Stephanie's father this afternoon, as he's not too well. I have some business out their way, too, so I'll grab a bite somewhere."

He was lunching with her, she thought instantly.

And just when had *that* been arranged? As, of course, it *had* been. Last night, when Stephanie had got so angry with him in the garden?

"Fine," she said brightly. "Rennie and I can indulge in some 'women talk' while you're out of the way."

He looked at her stonily, then shrugged and said he'd see her later, and she went into the house alone.

At luncheon Rennie glanced speculatively at Corinne. "Come on, Corinne, let's have it. Something's on your mind, isn't it?"

Corinne took a deep breath. "Rennie, I want to know about Fleur—and Ashley. About the two of them together."

"Oh, she was very beautiful, of course, and she knew a trick or two about men—she sure must have for Ashley to fall for her. He's usually too level-headed to get caught up in a wily trap like Fleur's." Rennie looked directly at Corinne and hesitated. "You think this is a strange set-up, don't you, love? Ashley marrying purely for monetary gain. It sounds cold-blooded and calculating, doesn't it? He wasn't always like that—but he was so bitter after what Fleur did, that for a while I thought he'd lose his reason. It was almost a relief when he came to me and outlined this crazy scheme of his, though I can't say I ever thought he'd go through with it. I was just glad he was thinking positively again."

"But *what* did she do?" Corinne almost shouted with frustration.

"They'd only been married a couple of months when it was clear she didn't want to settle down in this backwater, as Fleur called it. They had delayed their honeymoon because it was the height of the holiday season and Ashley was busy building up the stable business. It was all a bore for a girl like Fleur, and she kept nagging him until he agreed to take her on a cruise to the Canary Islands once the season was over. He had wanted to take her to Italy to visit his grandmother, in view of the generous check she sent at the news of their wedding, but no, Fleur wanted something more exotic. On the cruise ship there were plenty of playboy types to give her the kind of flattery she needed. One of them was an Italian who pursued her with all the finesse of a cat playing with a mouse. It was sheer coincidence that he was Italian—it could have been anybody. And married or not, Fleur was never destined to be a one-man woman, though Ashley's pride wouldn't let him believe it. He's a very male animal. . . ."

"I've noticed," Corinne murmured dryly.

"Well, when they came back to Merrowporth, the Italian followed them to Cornwall. A real flashy type, he was. Fleur asked him up here several times, for dinner or just to ferry her about while Ashley was working, and the atmosphere was so tense you could cut it with a knife. One night after he had been here there was a terrible row between Fleur and Ashley, and the next day she went off to look for her Italian at his hotel in the village. I don't know what she had in mind but they hired a sailboat for the day, maybe to get away so nobody could contact them. They were both irresponsible. Neither of them had more than a smattering of knowledge about sailing.

"They went out beyond the bay and got caught up in a sudden squall. No one could have got to them in time, though they were sighted by the coastguard some way down the coast. By then it was too late; the boat foundered on some jagged rocks and broke up like matchwood. They both drowned."

"How—how awful," Corinne whispered. The words sounded inadequate.

Rennie placed her hand over hers for a moment. "Yes. He'd lost his wife tragically and he knew in his heart that she'd been lost to him long before the accident. He blamed himself for the mistake he made in marrying her and for causing her to react the way she did. And then the bitterness took over. That and fury at her irresponsibility and the Italian's, for taking a boat out to sea with no experience. Ashley became obsessed by the thought and he wanted to do something tangible to try to prevent other people from being so foolhardy. But he had never been a sailing man. That was when he dreamed up the idea of the riding school on a big scale. We get our fair share of riding accidents down here, and there are plenty of small concerns who hire out horses for a quick return without a thought about the skill of the rider. Ashley threw his energies into organizing the stables. But the cost was staggering, and he knew it would probably have to wait until he got his grandmother's inheritance. Actually, the idea of the riding school saved his sanity after Fleur's death."

"And then he heard about this Georgio from his grandmother's companion?" Corinne said softly.

"Exactly. A handsome playboy, according to her, whose image immediately smacked of the man who had enticed Fleur away from him. He wouldn't let Georgio cheat him out of what was his by right—the money goes to the oldest surviving male relative, unless the donor decrees otherwise—and we're extremely short of male relatives, as you will discover, Corinne. There are only two."

"So, as a revenge for being cheated of his wife, he decided to cheat his grandmother?"

"Do you really condemn him for it now you know all the facts?" Rennie said sorrowfully. "I cannot. Anyway, I'd rather Ashley didn't know about this conversation, Corinne. He doesn't like pity, or being talked about behind his back."

"Of course, I shan't mention it," Corinne said quickly.

A few days before they were due to fly to Rome, the weather finally broke up, and a day of insidious, misty rain gave way to a heavy, charged atmosphere.

"A good thunderstorm would clear the air," Ashley said at dinner that evening. "It'll have to come before long."

Corinne shivered, hoping they'd be well away from here before it did. She hated thunderstorms.

She had been in bed about an hour when it seemed as if the house shook with a sudden roar. A burst of brilliant forked lightning zipped across the sky in a jagged spiral and rain sheeted against her window. Panic welled up inside her as the incessant roll of thunder gathered strength.

Suddenly a louder crack than all the rest seemed to split the house in two, and with a little scream of terror, Corinne leapt out of bed and stumbled across the room, wrenched open the adjoining door between her room and Ashley's, and rushed across the intervening space between them. Her eyes were dilated with fear as she reached the dark shape humped beneath the blankets. Without another thought she dived in beside him, desperately needing the warm comfort of another human being, and his arms closed around her immediately.

"I'm so frightened," she said jerkily. "I can't bear thunder—the noise—it's like—like—"

Ashley's hands smoothed her hair, and his voice was surprisingly gentle as he held her close in his arms. She had run to him without thinking, as naturally as a child. She gave an unconscious little sigh of relief as she was circled in his arms.

"It's all right, darling. It can't hurt you. You're quite safe with me, and it will pass soon."

Despite his words, she shook uncontrollably for some minutes, though his soothing voice was steadying her ragged nerves.

"It—it reminds me of the nightmares I used to have after my father died," she whispered against his shoulder. "It's the sound of the building collapsing . . . burying him . . . I've always connected it with the sound of thunder, however much I've tried to tell myself I'm being stupid, but I just can't help it. . . ."

"Hush, darling. The nightmares are all over now," he soothed her. "The storm will be gone by morning, and everything will be washed clean by the rain. Didn't your parents ever tell you that story when you were a little girl, about the fairies getting out their dustcloths during a storm and polishing up the leaves so they'd gleam in the morning sunshine?"

"No." She felt a smile touch the corners of her mouth, despite herself, thankful from the bottom of her soul that he realized her fear was genuine and that she hadn't come leaping into his bed on the flimsiest pretext. She suddenly felt her face burn with embarrassment, remembering that ridiculous bet. He could so easily take advantage of her right now . . . but this must be the epitome of a man's love for a woman, lying here like this, without passion, yet closer in body and spirit than if he had made passionate love to her.

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. Surely this *was* making love, she thought tremulously, trusting and loving him, knowing she'd be perfectly safe in his arms. Knowing it with an instinct that must have transmitted itself to him . . . but the storm was passing, and she knew she had to get out of his arms before the instinctive innocence that had sent her there was lost.

She extricated herself from his arms and slid out of the bed. He made no move to stop her, and she sped across the floor to the adjoining door.

"I'm all right now," she mumbled. "Thank you, Ashley."

She didn't elaborate why she was thanking him, but she heard the usual little mocking laugh, tempered now with a kind of tenderness.

"Thank *you*, my lovely Corinne," he said softly. "And forgive me if I bless the elements for sending you into my arms for a little while!"

She hardly spoke to him on the long drive to London the next morning, and his own reticence could be explained by the need to concentrate on driving in the misty rain that still lingered. The long drive eventually came to an end, and there was little time to brood over past mistakes or future plans. After the drive everything moved very fast and suddenly their nonstop flight to Rome was over. Incredibly, they were beginning the descent.

Rennie was ahead of them while they were still making their way out, and Corinne suddenly felt the pressure of Ashley's hand on her arm. It was the first time he'd touched her since last night, and she was unable to stop herself from flinching.

"I just wanted to thank you for doing all this. I just hope we can carry it through." His words were clipped.

A wave of misery rushed over her. Of course, he had been only acting last night, she reminded herself, when he'd murmured those endearments to her that had sounded so convincing.

Outside, the burning heat of the Italian sun was blinding. She fumbled in her bag for her sunglasses as she stepped on to the tarmac. Even that seemed to burn through her thin-soled sandals, and she was glad when they'd gone through the formalities and went outside the airport to where a large, gleaming black car stood waiting, a uniformed chauffeur standing to take the luggage from them.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Ashley," the man said in English, though he was clearly Italian, and Rennie grinned at her as if to say, You see what I mean?

"This is Bernardo, Corinne, Grandmother's chauffeur," Ashley said easily. "He's been with her so long now, he's almost one of the family. How is she, Bernardo?" he added abruptly.

"Not good." Bernardo shook his head slowly. "The poor Signora, she is a fighter, as you know, but she is failing very fast, and this birthday party must almost certainly be her last. It is a miracle she has lived so long."

He stopped talking and drove in gloomy silence, and Rennie leaned forward from the back seat.

"Have the others arrived yet, Bernardo? The rest of the family?"

"Oh, some," he nodded. "The sisters, you know—the Signora's sisters, who are almost as infirm as she is, but look far worse, not having her spirit. Some of the younger Signoras, and some male friends who have been invited for the numbers. And the young one—Georgio—he is there with his mother."

They drove steadily northward until the terrain began to rise, and there was more open countryside surrounding them. Elegant villas and apartments shouted the fact that here was where the wealthy Romans lived, outside the bustle of the city. Ashley pointed ahead to where a sumptuously sprawling villa, low and white with a pink tiled roof, lay gleaming in the brilliant sun. As they drew nearer, Corinne felt her heart begin to pound. Ashley had not prepared her for this, she thought sinkingly. They drew up in the circular drive in front of the arched front door, and as they left the car, Bernardo drove it silently away to some concealed place, where someone else would evidently see to the luggage.

"Don't look so frightened, Corinne," Rennie murmured. "They won't eat you—and don't forget you're supposed to have been married to Ashley for well over a year, and that he should have told you something about the place."

She spoke apologetically, as if realizing it was something they had both missed out, but no description could have done justice to the villa anyway. Outside there was a tiled sun terrace away to one side, and in front a pine-scented courtyard. The air was heavy with the scent of exotic flowers, and the brilliance of their hues took her breath away. She started to go inside the villa, hoping her quaking knees weren't too obvious.

Here, too, the opulence of her surroundings stunned her. From the marbled hall, a magnificent teak and marble staircase led to the first floor. The furnishings were of traditional Tuscan design and the paintings adorning the richly embossed wall coverings were obviously the work of old masters. Corinne swallowed. This was all a terrible mistake. Apart from the marriage and the difficulty she knew she would encounter in passing herself off as Ashley's wife without arousing suspicion . . . here was a lifestyle of which she had never dreamed, and it terrified her.

A door opened at the far end of the entrance hall, and a smiling woman came through it. Not Grandmother obviously, for she was about Rennie's age, and she approached on eager clicking heels on the marbled floor.

"Renata, how good to see you!" It surprised Corinne to hear Rennie addressed correctly, and then the woman turned to the others. "And Ashley, the same as ever, only more good-looking. And this is your lovely wife at last."

The eyes smiled at Corinne, and she felt a leap of embarrassment at the welcome in them. Ashley introduced the woman as his Aunt Carlotta, putting his arm around Corinne as he did so. The woman pecked her on the cheek.

"Such a pretty name for a pretty girl," she said. "But come, you must say hello to your grandmother, Ashley. She has been impatient to see you, and there is plenty of time to see your rooms. We are all on the patio behind the villa."

She led the way through a cool passageway to where the back of the villa threw open its long glass doors to a broad patio beyond. Half a dozen people lounged about on deckchairs around a vivid blue swimming pool. Several older people were sitting in the shade of trees nearer the villa, awaiting their arrival. They all rose, save one: a small, birdlike woman dressed in black, with a faded beauty in her thin face and eyes that were exactly the color of Ashley's. She sat in an electrically-powered wheelchair, a light shawl around her shoulders despite the heat of the day, and though she was clearly coming toward the end of her days, she greeted them with great dignity and the suspicion of tears in her eyes as Ashley knelt down beside her and kissed her quickly on both cheeks. The involuntary action both touched and surprised Corinne, and when he rose he sat at once on an empty chair by his grandmother's side, still holding her hands.

"So, at last you come to see me, my Ashley," she said in a brittle, threadlike voice with only the merest trace of Italian in it. "And I am supposed to greet you as if the years between never happened."

Her thin face, glowing as it did with the pleasure of seeing him and the light in her eyes, belied the accusing words. He hugged her thin body, chuckling softly and murmuring into her ear in a sudden string of Italian words that had her laughing in return.

"You are as charming as ever, you rogue," she said. "No wonder you managed to keep unmarried for so long with that smooth tongue of yours. But I am impatient to meet my new granddaughter. Come here, child."

The words were softly spoken, but nevertheless a command. Corinne moved forward, and after a second's hesitation, followed Ashley's lead and knelt down at the old lady's side, so she wouldn't have to crane her neck and look into the sun. She was scrutinized for several moments, until she felt the guilt she was feeling must be oozing out of every pore, but at last the old lady's face relaxed into a satisfied smile.

"So. You are the girl Ashley married," she murmured. "And now I see he did right to wait so long."

It was a compliment, and Corinne felt her face flame with unexpected pleasure as the calm words were spoken. Impulsively she leaned forward and kissed the dry old cheek.

"Thank you, Grandmother," she said huskily. She met Ashley's startled eyes, seeing the relieved pleasure in them, and he got up swiftly and pulled Corinne to her feet, holding her close to his side, his arm about her waist. He brushed her forehead slightly with his lips.

◆

*"Oh! Love," they said, "is King of Kings,*
*And Triumph is his crown.*
*Earth fades in flame before his wings,*
*And Sun and Moon bow down."*

Rupert Brooke
Song

"I knew you'd love Corinne as soon as you met her, Grandmother," he said easily. "And you should remember what you used to tell me when I was a small boy—if something's worth having, it's worth waiting for."

His arm tightened a little around her waist, and she felt her face color. He spoke for all the world as if they were a very loving young married couple, and it was so real she could almost believe it herself.

"But no sign of a *bambino* yet." Grandmother spoke with the artlessness of extreme age. "I had hoped you would have produced my first great-grandchild before this. Perhaps with the fertile Italian air . . . who knows?"

"Grandmother, you'll make Corinne blush." Rennie suddenly stepped forward and kissed the old lady in greeting. "She's not used to your wicked, outspoken ways, remember. And never mind about those two—they can look after their own future. How about you then, and what are all these tales we hear about your not being so well?"

"Pshaw!" It was enough to turn her attention away from Corinne and Ashley. "The doctors don't know everything in this world. I'll see my eighty summers, never fear, and another one besides, maybe. I'm not ready to leave this world yet, and I want to see and hold another *bambino* in my arms before I die. There are too many old people in this family of ours already, Renata. We are dying out, and I look to young ones to put that right. Ashley and Margaretta and Georgio."

Corinne felt Ashley's arm stiffen around her wasit and then drop to his side. His Aunt Carlotta came over and drew them toward the second group around the pool, aunts and cousins, one of whom was the beautiful Margaretta. Her husband was a slim dark Roman, with a chiseled nose and piercing black eyes, looking as if he'd come straight out of an Italian film set. She liked Margaretta at once, with her full red mouth and vivacious nature. Then there was Georgio.

He lounged on the floor of the patio, his back against a tree, just long enough for them to admire his pose before he rose to greet them. He was the most beautiful young man she'd ever seen, Corinne thought at once.

His hair was as black as jet, curling to a fashionable length and gleaming with health. His skin was tanned to a rich mahogany, made even more noticeable by the white shirt he wore carelessly open to the waist, beneath which were tight-fitting blue slacks. He had all the insolent charm of someone who knows he only has to lift his little finger to get what he wants. Corinne felt almost mesmerized by the way his dark eyes smiled into hers as he took her hand.

"I am enchanted," he murmured, when Aunt Carlotta introduced her. His English was nowhere as good as that of the others, but infinitely more attractive because of the deep husky accent with which he spoke. "It is very agreeable to find I have such a lovely English cousin."

He lifted her hand flamboyantly to his lips, holding it there a few moments while his eyes met hers above the point of contact. In spite of his undoubted charm, she felt a sudden shiver of revulsion at the blatant use of his masculinity, and had to resist the urge to pull her hand away from him. Ashley made no attempt to conceal his antagonism toward the other man, and Corinne hoped fervently the visit wasn't going to run into any additional difficulties. She was glad, a little while later, to be shown the rooms in the villa where they were all to sleep. Anxiety began to rise inside her again as she followed Aunt Carlotta up the sweeping, elegant marble staircase. How could she demure about being put into a double room with her husband?

Her worst fears were realized when Aunt Carlotta threw open the door of a tastefully furnished bedroom, dominated with a massive bed. The windows were open to catch every breath of air, and Corinne walked across to them at once to hide her burning face from the sudden amused look on Ashley's face. The ground below was lush and green with flowering vegetation and meandering streams.

"It's very beautiful," she said to Aunt Carlotta. "The air is like wine."

The older woman nodded. "*Si*, as Grandmother said, very fertile!" She smiled and left them to their unpacking.

"Very fertile indeed," Ashley said, putting his arm around her. "My relatives have a quaint way of phrasing things sometimes, don't they? Not that there was any doubt about the way dear Georgio was appraising you downstairs."

She heard the sudden anger in his voice, and was instantly on the defensive.

"Are you going to start playing the heavy-handed husband?" Corinne snapped.

"If I have to."

She gasped. He thought he owned her, didn't he? He suddenly gripped her wrist and hauled her toward a side door. He threw it open to reveal a small dressing room that included a single bed.

"All the comforts of home," he said coolly. "So you see, I have no intention of forcing myself on you, Corinne, even though last night's interlude was delightful."

Her cheeks flamed, remembering how she'd clung to him in her terror of the thunderstorm, but remembering the rare tenderness in his voice and actions, she bit back the furious retort that was on the tip of her tongue.

"You'd better see the rest of it," he said shortly. "And I apologize on behalf of the architect, but the bathroom has to be reached through the dressing room, so if you're an early riser, please creep through, will you? I've no wish to be disturbed by nocturnal nymphs floating in and out of my room."

He threw open another door, and inside was a bathroom in delicate pink ceramic, scattered with tiny hand-painted pictures of woodland scenes. There was a shower as well, and the room followed the overall rose-pink tone of the suite. It was sheer luxury, and Corinne suddenly longed for a bath.

"Would anyone be offended if I took a bath before dinner?" she asked distantly.

"Do as you please," he answered. "You'll find your way down again, will you—or do you want me to wait?"

"No, thank you. I'm not a complete idiot," she said crisply.

Oh, but she was, she thought miserably as she soaked in the hot, scented water. She had let herself fall hopelessly in love with him.

She had to go through the dressing room for her dinner clothes. Ashley was still there, stretched out on the single bed.

"Excuse me," she said frostily. "I forgot my clothes. I thought you said you were going down to join the others."

"No, I didn't say that," he countered softly. "You said you didn't want me to stay, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to."

She hugged the fluffy pink bath towel more closely around her body, and he suddenly laughed. "I can't see through a thick towel, Corinne. Relax, for goodness' sake. We're never going to fool anybody if you're as prickly as a porcupine whenever I come near you. Let's start again, shall we?"

She looked at him suspiciously, but slowly she nodded. He sat up on the bed, his voice suddenly soft. He moved toward her, tracing the soft contour of her face with one finger, his eyes surprisingly gentle.

"Good. Then perhaps you'll stop looking at me with that frightened rabbit expression. It. . . ."

There was a sudden tap on the door.

"Are you two coming down?" Rennie's voice called through from the corridor. "Grandmother's doctor has called on a routine visit, Ashley, and I thought you might like a word with him."

Whatever he had been going to say was forgotten as they moved swiftly apart at her voice.

"Get dressed, Corinne. I'll see you downstairs."

His voice was clipped again, suddenly curt where his action had been so gentle. She stared at the bedroom door after he'd gone, wishing his moods weren't so mercurial.

She dressed quickly in a cool lemon-colored dress and white sandals. Her hands weren't quite steady as she smoothed down the lines of her dress and went downstairs to reacquaint herself with her new family."

After a week in Italy, Corinne decided she could definitely get to enjoy the good life, though as a steady diet, she was willing to admit that it could pall eventually. It was easy to forget that this was all a game, and to let the luxury and the beauty of the place go to her head like wine. It was easy to love Grandmother, who was unstinting in her delight that Ashley had found himself such a delightful wife, even if she kept reminding them they had produced no *bambinos*.

"A strong, virile man like my Ashley and such a beautiful girl," the old lady would shake her head and stare at them in sorrow. "It would give me such pleasure to know there was life stirring with you, Corinne, before I die."

The embarrassment she'd felt at Grandmother's reference to their honeymoon was quickly replaced at her final words. She went to the old lady's side and knelt beside her.

"Don't talk about dying," she whispered. "You're as strong as an ox, or so you're always telling us. And there's time enough for babies, Grandmother. I bet you had nobody telling you when to have yours, did you?"

The old lady laughed, patting her hand and agreeing cheerfully. All the same, Corinne knew that her days were numbered. Ashley's eyes had been grave after he'd spoken with the family doctor the first day they'd arrived.

"Three month's—maybe six," he'd said briefly to Corinne and Rennie. "It's foolish, but I find it as unbelievable as expecting the Rock of Gibraltar to fall into the sea. We've never kept in close touch, but she was as real to me as the moon and stars, always there, unchanging. Perhaps we should stay on after the visit, Ren—or me, at least."

Rennie shook her head decisively. "I don't think so, Ashley. She's not the sort of person who'd thank you for waiting around for her to die. At least she's had the satisfaction of meeting Corinne, and loving her, and I thank you for that, my dear," she added.

Ashley glanced at her, nodding his head in silent agreement. Then he went out of the villa abruptly, saying he was going to take a ride.

"It's his way of coming to terms with things," Rennie said quietly. "He's not as hard as he likes to pretend, you know. And I like to think the riding school he wants to start at Merrowporth would be a fitting tribute to Grandmother's memory, apart from anything else."

Probably so, Corinne admitted. There was certainly no doubt in her mind that Ashley was very fond of his grandmother, and she was glad to have had the privilige of meeting her, too. There seemed to be an instant affinity between the two of them that had surpised and delighted them both.

Since the night of their arrival, Ashley had quite deliberately avoided any contact with her except in public, when they needed to preserve their devoted image.

He suggested taking her sightseeing one day, a few days before Grandmother's birthday party. As yet they hadn't bought her a birthday present, and it was to be a combined shopping and sightseeing trip to Rome.

It was a wonderful day, she thought afterward. They visited all the conventional tourist places, the Colosseum, St. Peter's Basilica, the Spanish Steps . . . they stopped by the Trevi Fountain, and Corinne couldn't resist throwing a coin into its glittering water, but the wish she made was kept a secret from Ashley.

It was toward the end of the day when they reached the shopping areas. Corinne tried to imagine what someone like Grandmother would appreciate for her birthday and even Ashley admitted he was finding it difficult.

"Something for the villa seems ostentatious when she has everything she needs," he commented. "A plant in a pot when the place is full of them? A tree that she'll never see grow to maturity?"

"Oh, no. Something more personal!" Corinne protested.

"Such as? Clothes, do you mean? She always wears black, and she's not going to change now. Jewelry, perhaps?"

Corinne shook her head slowly as they strolled past windows crammed with gifts of every description, but nothing seemed to fit the bill. Then she paused outside a small boutique.

"Oh, that's it, Ashley. Look, it's pefect!"

He made a face. "That shawl? It's not meant for an old lady, surely? It's a young girl's style, much too frivolous. . . ."

"Why shouldn't she have something frivolous?" Corinne said softly. "Will anyone else think to buy her such a lovely thing, do you suppose? And it's her last birthday, Ashley, if what the doctor says is true. If it were my last birthday I'd want something frivolous and romantic, something to remind me of nights when I was young and beautiful, and someone cared enough to want to see me in a black gossamer shawl threaded with gold flowers!"

She stopped in embarrassment at his amused smile.

"All right, you've made your point. You're being positively poetic."

They were in good spirits by the time they got back in the car and drove off toward the hills. It was good to get back to the villa. Grandmother was still taking her siesta, and there were noises coming from the direction of the pool.

"Oh, I'd love to be in there now," Corinne sighed.

"There's nothing to stop you. You brought a bathing suit, didn't you?"

"Have we time before dinner?"

"You have. I want to have a talk with Aunt Carlotta if I can find her. I'll see you later," he said.

"Fine," she answered brightly, wishing he would join her. She could hear Georgio, Margaretta, and Luigi splashing and laughing, and she was suddenly conscious of being the outsider. But she called out to them that she'd join them in a few minutes, and hurried upstairs to change.

Georgio smiled and whistled when he saw her approach. Her suit was a bit skimpy, and she saw the flicker of admiration in his eyes. Georgio jumped out of the pool and came running toward her, a lithe, athletic figure, superbly suntanned in brief white swimming trunks. He was the kind of person who always seemed to be smiling; his face was alive with health, his white teeth gleaming in his wide, handsome smile.

"You hide too much of yourself for too long," he said in his sexy accent. "I think we must get to know each other better, my little English cousin."

"The little English *wife* of your cousin," she corrected.

Georgio shook his head slowly.

"Ah, no. You are nobody's 'little wife,' my *bellissima*," he said softly. "You are the sun goddess. You belong to the world."

"And Georgio in particular if he has his way," Margaretta suddenly laughed at him from the side of the pool. She flipped a handful of blue water over him, and he leaned over, scooping up great handfuls and drenching her with it in retaliation. Luigi immediately came to her aid, half-drowning Georgio, who shrieked to Corinne to help him and not let them get away with it.

"Come on," he shouted. "Don't stand there as if you're afraid to get wet."

She eased herself into the water beside him and joined in the battle between the two couples, gasping as a sudden gush of water swamped her, blinding her for a minute.

"Let's get away from them." Georgio suddenly grabbed her hand and lunged forward through the water, pulling her after him. He swam with powerful strokes, and she followed, laughing and spluttering until they reached the far end of the pool, where he turned in a blue torrent and hugged her in his arms, before she could stop him.

"That was good, no?" He laughed as they both trod water, still blinking it out of their eyes and gasping with the exertion. She laughingly agreed, and tried to wriggle out of his arms, but he had no intention of letting her go, she realized.

"Georgio, for heaven's sake!" She was still laughing as he tried to nuzzle his lips into her neck. She could never take him seriously. He was the type of man who was a perennial boy.

"Ah, the little English prude," he said laughingly in her ear. "So much the untouchable . . ."

"You're impossible." She could hear her own laughter at his outrageous words, accompanied by the flirtatious rolling of his eyes.

"That's not exactly the word I'd use to describe him!" Ashley's furious voice sounded right alongside her, and Corinne jerked up her head from the tangle of Georgio's curls to see him standing at the edge of the pool, his face a white mask of rage, his hands clenched tightly by his sides. "You'd better come out of there, Corinne, and get changed for dinner. I'll wait for you in our room."

He strode off toward the villa, while she gaped after him. Who did he think he was, she thought angrily, to treat her as some kind of chattel in front of everybody? The others in the pool had heard and were grinning. Georgio was openly laughing.

"Well, *carissima*? Are you going to go running after your lord and master?" he said softly.

"He can wait," she said angrily. He could wait forever as far as she was concerned. She twisted out of Georgio's clinging arms and struck out for the far end of the pool. Twenty minutes later she stepped into the bedroom where Ashley was standing with arms folded by the window. He spun around as soon as she entered, shaking out her damp hair and involuntarily tightening the belt of the short beach robe, her heart beating quickly.

"What you choose to do on your own time once we are back in England is no concern of mine," he snapped out. "Play up to any man you wish, since that seems to be so appealing to you—just as long as it's well away from Merrowporth. But while you're here, please remember that you're my wife, and that I expect you to act accordingly."

His assumption that she was the same type of person as Georgio infuriated her.

"I do not play up to men, as you call it," she said icily. "I was merely being polite to a member of your family, which, if I may say so, you have pointedly neglected to do. It's perfectly obvious you've no time for Georgio, and we all know why, don't we?"

She was referring to the inheritance from his grandmother, but too late, she realized he guessed that she knew all about Fleur and the Italian playboy. His face became set and hard. Had it ever softened toward her, she wondered? There was nothing there now but contempt and chagrin.

"My grandmother may be old, but she is not senile as far as her faculties are concerned. She has a romantic soul, and one hint that things are not as they should be between us. . . ."

"Oh, come on, Ashley." Her scorn matched his. "How long are you going to keep up the legend that she'll change her will in Georgio's favor if our so-called marriage looks as if it's on the rocks? Why don't you just admit to yourself and to me that you wanted to bring a 'wife' to Italy because you couldn't bear the blow to your ego if it was known Fleur died while she was out with another man—and an Italian playboy at that? Though why you never wrote and told your grandmother she had just drowned and left it at that, is beyond me."

She ended on a gasp as he crossed the room in furious strides and slapped her hard across the face. Just as suddenly he imprisoned her tightly in his arms.She could feel the tautness in him as she tried to stop the tears from brimming over at the stinging in her cheek.

"I don't expect you to understand," he said in a grating voice. "But yes, you're right in a way—though I call it pride, not egotism. And disbelief that I could be so wrong about a person, too. She was so beautiful. Like an exotic flower, and when she professed love with that husky voice of hers, how could anyone doubt it? How could they know it was turned on and off as easily as a tap? Yes, I was hurt—mortified—humiliated—but if you'd held something beautiful and precious in your hand and had it snatched away so cruelly it almost drove you demented wondering why, why, why—could you have written calmly to an old woman, saying, oh, by the way, Fleur drowned? When all Grandmother lives for is the family, and the longing for me and my wife to produce a little *bambino*, and never stopped telling me so in her occasional letters?"

"I never expected you to tell her casually." She could still be angry, because even though his words might have caught at her heart, they were said in a flat, unemotional tone. "But in time. . . ."

"There was no time. I'd met and married her in the space of a few weeks—and obviously you know all the rest." He was furious now, clearly thinking she'd been listening to gossip at Merrowporth. "We hardly knew each other, I suppose, and by the time I found out the truth about her, it was too late. Our delayed 'honeymoon' was a fiasco as soon as somebody else came on the scene who was a new face, a new excitement. And by the time everything was over, and I had more or less regained my senses after Fleur's death, there was a letter from Barbara telling me all about the proposed birthday party for Grandmother, of her failing state of health, and the appearance of Georgio on the scene, when he'd been living quietly with his mother in the north of Italy all these years. And now they'd suddenly popped up and moved to Rome. Within a short while, they'd moved in here. It didn't take much common sense to know what was going on."

Corinne felt suddenly wilted. She tried to wriggle out of Ashley's arms where she was still held tightly.

"Will you let me go, please?" she said coldly. "If you want me to look presentable this evening, I need to shower and dress without all these traumatic disruptions every five minutes, and to try and compose myself so that I don't look like the victim of a wife-beater."

"I'm so sorry about that. . . ." She flinched away from his finger as he touched her burning cheek. She didn't want him touching her, ever again. She felt nothing for him, she told herself, nothing.

"Please don't trouble yourself about it." Her voice was still icy. "And I'll try to behave as you would wish when your grandmother is around, but if I want to swim with Georgio, I shall. If he asks me to dance at the party, I shall dance with him. I won't be dictated to every minute of the day by you or anyone else. You don't *own* me—"

"Oh, yes, I do." His arms tightened again and his voice was rough with fury. "That's exactly what I do, Corinne. You're bought and paid for, remember? And until our marriage is dissolved, don't you ever forget it."

He suddenly bent his head and kissed her hard on the lips. A savage, insulting kiss that bruised her mouth and she could taste her own blood when he'd finished. She twisted away from him and stalked toward the dressing room door to go into the bathroom, praying he wouldn't guess at the trembling in her limbs at his treatment of her. At the door she turned to glower at him.

"I loathe you," she said in a low, controlled voice. "And don't you forget that!"

As she stripped off her bathing suit and let the cooling shower soothe her ragged nerves a little, she wondered how this day, that had started out so marvelously, could have deteriorated so appallingly. A few hours ago they were in Rome, sitting closely in a tiny, forgotten church, feeling the communion of the ages drawing them together, almost overpowered by its beauty and its mystique, and now they were worlds apart . . . so far she doubted they could ever be so close again. She swallowed deeply, feeling a rush of pain.

By the time she was dressed for dinner she had managed to conceal the marks on her cheek where he had struck her. She walked downstairs with cool dignity, and he came toward her, his face smiling, his hands taking hers, his voice telling her she looked lovely as always. Only she could see that there was a coldness in his eyes that belied every word he said. To the others, they were the ideal couple, and she had to listen to Grandmother's teasing yet again about the *bambino* she was apparently so slow in producing.

"She would not be so slow if she stayed more in the hot Italian sun, maybe." Georgio smiled across the candlelit table into her eyes, his meaning blatantly obvious on his handsome face. She felt Ashley tense beside her, and very daringly, she put her hand on his knee and answered quickly, deliberately misinterpreting.

"It's a lovely thought, Georgio, but I am not really suited to this climate. I belong in England. Too many weeks here and all my energy would be sapped. It's marvelous to come here and meet you all at last, but it will be just as lovely to go home, and Merrowporth is very beautiful, too. We don't have all this sun, but Cornwall has a very special charm, with the moors and the mists and the legends that go with it."

She avoided mentioning the sea, and Grandmother smiled at her from the head of the table where she always presided.

"It's easy to see that you're in love with your home, and that is very important in a happy marriage," she said approvingly. "You are fortunate in your choice of a wife, Ashley. She has beauty and intelligence and complements you very well."

"I think so," he murmured. His own hand closed over hers for an instant before she pulled it away from his knee in sudden embarrassment. She was acting just like a wife, she thought dizzily, covering up an awkward moment at a dinner party until her husband regained his composure. It had been spontaneous, and she realized he had appreciated it. She averted her head from his almost tender smile, knowing too well the treacherous effect it could have on her and applied herself to the excellence of the meal. It was delicious; a light pasta in a spicy sauce to start, and then lamb Tuscan style, braised with wine and rosemary, served with peas and artichokes fried in breadcrumbs and butter, tangy with a dash of lemon. And to finish, fresh pineapple in maraschino, with liqueurs and coffee.

"Would you care for a walk in the garden, Corinne, to use up some of that energy of yours?" Georgio was smiling down at her, his eyes expectant. Harmless, she thought, despite what Ashley thought, but she was beginning to feel the effects of the day in Rome and the row she'd had with Ashley. She shook her head regretfully at his handsome cousin.

"I don't think so," she said. "I think I'll have an early night, if no one minds. I have to keep my strength up for this party, remember, and I'm not as 'young' as Grandmother!"

She spoke teasingly as she bent to kiss the old lady good night, and Grandmother laughed back.

"Good night, my love," she said. "*Buona notte.* I'll send Ashley up to you directly."

Corinne didn't dare look at him for more than a fleeting glance at her words. He was still smiling the remote smile of his that seemed to fool everyone else, and touched her hand with his as she passed his chair. She was tired and depressed, she realized as she undressed. Wishing this visit would soon be over, and they could go back . . . but how could they ever go back to what they were before? The only way was to part immediately, for she was sure it would be impossible for her to go on living at Merrowporth with him. It would be humiliating for him, perhaps, to have to explain that his second wife had disappeared so suddenly out of his life, but that was his problem.

Her head ached dully, and it was too hot to sleep. She tried to make her mind a blank, and to imagine she was lying cocooned in black velvet.

Her senses were suddenly alert as she heard the door click open, and Ashley tiptoed into the room to reach the dressing room. She kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep, keeping her breathing regular and even. She could feel him standing by the bed, looking down at her, and then he suddenly bent and touched his lips to hers very gently.

"Thank you, *carissima*," he said softly, and then he moved away and into the dressing room, and she heard the door close between them.

And she felt the slow trickle of tears dampen her cheeks as she lay there sleepless in the softly scented night. Oh, why, why, she asked herself despairingly, just when she thought she'd steeled herself up to clearing out of his life, did he have to do some little thing, some tender little gesture that stirred her heart, and made her realize how desperately she loved him?

Grandmother's party, Corinne realized, was not to be so very different from the house party that seemed to have been going on at the villa ever since they had arrived. About a dozen or so more people appeared on the night, mostly old friends of the family, and there was a magnificent buffet meal on the patio, followed by dancing for those who felt energetic enough, and the wine flowed like water. The language spoken was a mixture of English and Italian in every kind of accent, and the whole high-days-and-holidays atmosphere of the visit was at its peak. The presents had all been given to Grandmother earlier in the day by those staying at the villa, and that evening she was resplendent in a black silk evening dress, with the gossamer shawl embroidered with its gold flowers around her shoulders. She had hugged Ashley and Corinne effusively when they gave it to her at breakfast.

"It's beautiful, and I shall feel like the belle of the ball," she smiled, her eyes suspiciously moist.

"And so you shall be," Corinne said. "The most important person there. And in a setting that is just perfect."

Grandmother laughed and patted her hand. "Ah, my dear, but you have the bloom of youth, which is more precious than all the possessions you can acquire. I think you know that, and also you have that other precious thing—the love of a good man. But I am not discontented, because I had the same, and I thank you both for reminding me of nights when I too danced under the stars."

She stroked the gossamer shawl with faraway eyes, and Corinne stole a look at Ashley, wondering how he would react to his grandmother's words. But apparently he was unconcerned by them, and she was glad he did not bristle too noticeably. Anyway, there were too many distractions that day to spend time brooding on their own problems, she thought thankfully. Presents arrived frequently, and there was a stream of callers during the day. And in the evening, the party.

Corinne had brought a new long dress with her especially for the occasion. It was white, cut very simply and elegantly, with a figure-molding bodice and floating white skirt. Every hem was edged with heavy silver threads, and as she applied her make-up and stood up to admire herself in the mirror, she knew she was trying to see herself through Ashley's eyes, and hoping he'd find her beautiful. She tapped on the dressing room door to ask if he was ready to join the party.

He came out of the room, looking extremely handsome in a black velvet jacket and dark trousers, a frilled white shirt and evening bow tie. She caught her breath a little at the sight of him.

"You look more Italian than English," she said softly. "And very nice, if I'm allowed to say so." The understatement of the year, she added to herself. His face relaxed into a smile of pleasure.

"We make a very nice couple," he nodded to their reflections in the mirror, his words as light as her own. "The egotistical Mr. Jay and his radiant wife, who looks as if she just stepped out of the pages of a bridal magazine."

She laughed self-consciously at his teasing, but pleased beyond measure that they were on reasonably good terms again. And it was true. She did look radiant, as if she hadn't a care in the world. It took so little to put the stars in her eyes, she thought ruefully. Just his smiling approval . . . and at his grandmother's reaction to the birthday gift Corinne had chosen for her, he was well pleased with her right now. She turned to pick up the beaded white evening bag that went with the dress, and twirled around to show a gleam of silver evening sandals.

"I'll do then?" she asked provocatively. Ashley laughed.

"Stop fishing for compliments, woman. You know very well you'll outshine every other female in the place. Let's go down, then, before they start wondering what we're doing up here all this time. We don't want Grandmother to start on her usual subject, do we?"

That was enough to make Corinne's face feel hot, and she walked quickly to the door. But the memory of his words put a glow on her that stayed with her all the evening, and when she went into his arms to dance she did so with a little sigh, remembering the night of their wedding, when as now, she was bemused by the dangerous enchantment of his nearness.

"Not too much longer now," he said suddenly. "We'll be leaving for Merrowporth in three days' time."

She looked up into his eyes in startled uncertainty at his change of mood, and wondered if he could have misread the little sigh she had given. It was better so, she thought unhappily, though it had been a sigh of pure relief that at last he was holding her, and the antagonism between them seemed to have vanished. Not that he sounded angry now, merely stating a fact in the expressionless voice he sometimes used.

"It's gone so soon," she murmured. "I hadn't realized we'd be leaving already."

"Getting used to the high life, are you?" The slight cynicism was back. "I had a word with the doctor just now, and he thinks it's best if we disperse gradually, a few at a time, and Rennie will be quite glad to get back home. The heat doesn't suit her too well."

"I see." Obviously he had felt there was no need to consult her. She just had to do as she was told. Just like any employee.

"I shall make the necessary arrangements for the flight home tomorrow," he went on.

"You think you've been here sufficient time to do as you intended then." She could hardly go into details on the dance-floor, even though she had the oddest feeling that they were remote from everybody else. Not at all in the same way as on their wedding night, however, when she had felt so close to him in body and spirit . . . this was something quite different. They were polite strangers, pressed close in the proximity of the exercise, discussing a business arrangement while the real business of the birthday party milled on around them.

"I think we've been here long enough," he said, without further comment. The music ended and they walked off the floor to part company as other people claimed them, and then Corinne found herself caught up in Georgio's warm embrace as he pulled her back on to the dance floor. She caught sight of Ashley's face, set into immobility for a moment as she whirled off to the music with Georgio's arms around her, and then he turned his attention deliberately to a beautiful olive-skinned girl who had been introduced as the daughter of one of Grandmother's friends.

"I have been waiting for this moment all evening, Corinne," Georgio said seductively in her ear. He nibbled the lobe tantalizingly, and she moved her head away laughingly.

"Stop it and behave yourself, Georgio," she said lightly. "Do you want them all thinking that Ashley's wife is a loose woman?"

"I wish she was," he whispered wickedly into the nape of her neck. "Then I would lure you into my room tonight after your husband has gone to sleep. I would very much like to see if the cool English girl has the fire in her veins that I suspect."

# I LOVE

*by Julie Houy*

*I wear you like a corsage of cymbidiums,*
*proud as a giraffe in a diamond necklace,*

*walk in the perfume*
*of a roomful of orchids,*

*glitter with jewel drops*
*from your tiffany kisses.*

*Your reflection flickers in my irises,*
*blinding me in firefly flashes.*

*I would make heavenly love to you*
*but, buoyant as Matisse, I float away*

"Georgio, I shall walk away from you right now if you don't stop this," she said severely. She was still laughing, knowing this was the best way to deal with him, and suddenly he laughed back.

"All right. You win. Isn't that what you English say? But I shall still keep my fantasies about you, my Corinne. You cannot stop me having those, can you?"

"I suppose not, though I'd rather you didn't."

He laughed again and kissed the tip of her nose, just as they were passing Ashley and several others, to her intense annoyance.

"Ah, now you go all prim on me, and I know it is all up between us. O.K. I'll be good from now on if you say so."

Why did he have to be the one to flatter her, she wondered? There were several other eligible young men there who were attractive and good dancers . . . but it seemed it had to be Georgio, the one most likely to infuriate Ashley.

Strangely enough, he made no comment about it when he danced with her again. Now the visit was drawing rapidly to an end and he'd apparently accomplished all he'd set out to do, she thought miserably, perhaps he'd decided there was no point in getting uptight over someone he needn't see again—at least, not in the immediate future. Her heart gave a little lurch as she realized that the next time all these people would be drawn together like this would probably be at Grandmother's funeral. It was a depressing thought, and she wondered briefly if she would be there. She wasn't sure she could face it when the time came, or whether she'd be asked. She stumbled a little and Ashley held her tighter for a minute.

"Steady," he said. "Don't go tripping up now."

She chose to see his words in a different context.

"I won't," she said coolly. "I haven't let you down yet, have I?"

The music ended and she walked quickly across the marbled floor to join Rennie and several of the older women seated around the outside.

"Had enough?" Rennie asked. "I think Grandmother is going to bed in a minute. She's done so well to keep lively this long. It's been quite a day, but I suppose when you're eighty you don't want to miss a moment of the special day."

"I suppose not. Rennie—you know we're going home in three days' time, I take it?"

The others remonstrated, but Rennie was adamant. And now that it was a fact, Corinne suddenly felt the need to go back to England again. Italy with its hot sun and its lush, exotic vegetation and sultry atmosphere was less alluring than an early Cornish morning, with the mists on the moors and the scent of the sea freshening in from the coast.

The final days rushed by, until it seemed she was hugging the small, black-clad figure of Grandmother once more, this time with real tears for both of them as they made their good-byes. They had known each other such a little while, and yet the old lady had made a mark in her life that she'd never forget, Corinne thought, with a catch in her throat. And Grandmother had a passing quip for her ears alone.

"Don't forget that of all possessions in this world, a *bambino* is the most precious, my Corinne," she said softly. "And completes the circle of a happy marriage. You are like two ends of the same piece of cord at present. The *bambino* joins you together as nothing else, *si*?"

"*Si*," she answered huskily, not finding it in her to make some flippant retort about something that was so dear to the old lady's heart.

The good-byes were made, the smooth drive to the airport in the sleek black car with Bernardo at the wheel, the handshakes, the kisses, the boarding of the plane. At last Corinne finally settled in her seat and felt the tears bubbling over as she turned her face into Ashley's shoulder as the drone of the engines grew in crescendo and lifted them into the clear blue Italian sky and headed for home.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, as he handed her a clean hanky. "I shouldn't let myself get so affected. But I got so fond of her, Ashley, I began to think of her as my own grandmother. Silly, isn't it?"

"Not silly at all," he said. "I'm touched by your concern."

She let her head lie against his shoulder for a while until she calmed down, and by the time the plane touched down at Heathrow she was able to think more clearly. She had fulfilled her part of the bargain well, she told herself. Grandmother had obviously grown as fond of her as she had of the old lady and considered them an ideally matched couple. She was shrewd enough to see through the charm of a boy like Georgio, Corinne was positive. She wouldn't dream of changing her will to leave her money to him to fritter away, despite the fact that he was pure Italian and more likely to keep her money in her beloved Italy for as long as it lasted.

The morning after Grandmother's birthday she had had a long talk with Ashley outside on the patio in the shade. He had talked about horses, riding, and his plans for a riding school at Merrowporth. And though he gave no hint whatsoever of the financial difficulties he had in even getting the thing started, Grandmother had suddenly put her hand on his and looked steadily into his eyes.

"I am sure it will all happen for you in the fullness of time, my dear," she had said quietly. It was almost like a solemn pledge between the two of them.

She shivered when they alighted from the plane at Heathrow. Since leaving England the autumn had chilled the air considerably, and they all noticed it after the warmth of the Italian sun. Ashley insisted that they wrap themselves up with blankets in the car for the long drive home, and it was well into the evening by the time they reached Cornwall. Merrowporth stood like a stark gray sentinel against the darkening skyline, and Corinne felt a rush of pleasure at seeing it, tinged with a stab of regret that she would leave it again so soon. She had definitely made up her mind, though she had said nothing to Ashley about her plans. She intended to write to Aunt Jessie and ask if she could come and visit her as soon as possible, saying nothing in the letter to alarm her aunt so soon after her supposedly happy marriage, but fully intending that she would not return to Cornwall again.

She deliberately pushed out of her mind the fact that part of her would always remain here. But she couldn't go on living day after day by his side, knowing he didn't love her and never would. He still loved his first wife, and probably always would.

She felt drained and exhausted by the time they went indoors, and the conversation between the three of them had dwindled in the last hour. Rennie disappeared at once to put the kettle on for a reviving cup of tea, and Ashley took the suitcases up to the bedrooms. There was a pile of mail waiting to be sorted, and Corinne busied herself with it. Not that she really expected any of it to be for her, but the sight of Aunt Jessie's familiar handwriting sent an unexpected lump to her throat. It was like the touch of a familiar friendly hand just at that moment, and she ripped open the envelope.

"Welcome home," the letter started. "I'm sure you must have had a marvelous time, and I'm looking forward to hearing all about it. The weather must have been an improvement on England anyway. We've been shivering in our boots up here, and I think we're in for an early winter with a sudden cold snap catching us all unawares in the last few days."

Corinne. Her aunt didn't usually go rabbiting on at such length about the weather in a vaguely stilted way like this. She wandered into the lounge and sat on the edge of one of the armchairs, shivering slightly herself in the chill of the unheated house, and skimmed the letter swiftly. When she'd got through the first couple of pages, she drew in her breath sharply.

"Now I don't want you worrying yourself, Corinne, but I've been seeing the doctor in the last few weeks, and he wants me to go into the hospital for some tests. It's nothing serious, I promise you, and I don't expect to be there more than four or five days. I'm waiting for a bed at present, so that will tell you there's no real cause for alarm."

All the same, her heart was beating uncomfortably fast as she finished reading the letter. Her aunt was one of those hale and hearty women who boasted of never having had a day's illness in their lives—a similar type to Ashley's grandmother, she suspected, and she certainly didn't like the sound of hospital "tests."

"Something wrong?" Ashley's voice beside her made her jump violently. She hadn't heard him come into the room, and she looked up to see him gazing down at her with an enigmatic expression on his face. Maybe he thought it was a love letter from an old flame, she thought, with a fleeting anger, but she couldn't be bothered with what he thought at that moment. She gestured to the letter in her hand.

"Aunt Jessie," she said briefly. "She has to go into the hospital sometime for tests. She doesn't elaborate, which is just like her, leaving me to imagine all sorts of things, while she thinks she's sparing me the details!"

"When is she going in?"

"Oh, she doesn't know yet. She's waiting for a bed, and I'm supposed to accept that that means it's nothing too urgent."

"Then accept it," he said calmly. "It's almost certainly the truth. Doctors don't keep patients hanging about unnecessarily if they suspect something really serious. Use your common sense, Corinne; I'm sure it'll be all right."

"Yes," she said unwillingly. "It's just—oh, I just feel so far away and useless when anything like this happens. You must know what I mean. Didn't you suggest staying on in Italy because of what the doctor told you about Grandmother?"

He nodded. "And decided it was better to come home instead of waiting around like a lot of ghouls, remember? I'd suggest the same thing would apply to your Aunt Jessie. She sounds the kind of no-nonsense person who wouldn't want crying relatives fussing around her when she's getting on with the business of sorting out her health problems with the same efficiency as everything else."

Corinne stared at him. "You must have some kind of sixth sense." She gave the glimmer of a smile. "You couldn't have summed her up more neatly."

"Well, then."

Rennie brought in a tray of tea and toast and glanced from one to the other of them. Corinne told her briefly about her aunt's letter.

"Why don't you telephone her?" she suggested. "Perhaps hearing her voice will reassure you, Corinne."

"That's a good idea. I'll drink my tea first though." She relaxed slightly. "Ten more minutes isn't going to change anything, is it?"

But she was glad when she could leave them together and go out to the hall telephone and dial her aunt's number. She sounded just as brisk as ever, Corinne thought, with relief, feeling rather foolish now, as if she'd expected some faint-voiced little woman to answer the phone. She answered all her aunt's inquiries about the trip as quickly as she could, and then insisted on being told exactly what was going on.

"Corinne, you fuss too much," Aunt Jessie said crossly. "I wasn't going to tell you anything at all until I'd been in and out, but I thought that was a bit underhanded. It's just as I told you—some tests about some nagging headaches I've been having lately—"

"Nagging headaches?" Corinne broke in quickly. "You mean they're going to do brain scans—things like that?"

Corinne felt a wave of nausea wash over her. It didn't sound like any simple kind of test to her. Aunt Jessie was still talking, calming her down as if she were the patient, Corinne thought, with faint hysteria.

"I wish now I hadn't mentioned it in my first letter after you got home from your honeymoon trip. If I'd known it was going to produce such a silly reaction, I certainly wouldn't have done so. Ashley won't thank me for upsetting you when you should be deliriously happy."

Tears stung her eyes for a moment. Dear, sweet, romantic Aunt Jessie, who, for all her brusque efficiency, was a romantic underneath.

"Asheley understands how anxious I feel," she said huskily. "Should I come up to see you, Aunt Jessie? I want to see for myself that you're all right—"

"You'll do no such thing! A few weeks after your wedding to think of leaving your brand-new husband!"

"Ashley wouldn't mind," she said weakly. It was what she'd intended to do anyway, only not like this . . . not because Aunt Jessie was ill. She felt guilty somehow, as if she'd willed this illness on to her aunt.

She suddenly had the receiver taken out of her hand.

"Aunt Jessie?" Ashley said into the phone. "She won't be happy unless she sees for herself that you're all right, you know. She's like a cat on hot bricks here."

Corinne couldn't hear her aunt's reaction to this, and she felt a gnawing sensation in her stomach as she listened to Ashley making small talk on the phone, answering her aunt's questions about Italy and saying it was nice to make her acquaintance at last, even if it was only briefly, and that he'd better hand her back to Corinne now.

"He sounds very nice, dear," Aunt

Jessie said enthusiastically. "But I've told him I won't hear of you coming all this way when there's absolutely no need for it. I'll let you know when I get the date to go in the hospital, don't worry."

"Promise?" Corinne then said woodenly. The two of them seemed to have taken the initiative out of her hands, and the reaction of the Italian visit, the flight home, and coming into this mini-crisis was beginning to have its effect. She felt suddenly light-headed, and was glad to hang up when her aunt assured her she was perfectly capable of sorting out her own affairs.

"I think I'll have an early night," she said abruptly when she rejoined the others. "I'm very tired, and not really up to any more conversation, if nobody thinks I'm being rude."

"Of course, we don't, love," Rennie said sympathetically. "I shall probably do the same. "It's been quite a long day, and to come home to some anxious news about your aunt is a bit unsettling. But I'm sure everything will be all right."

Corinne said good night and went upstairs. Her suitcase was already there. It was crazy, because she'd come back determined to leave Merrowporth as soon as possible and flee to Aunt Jessie's as a kind of haven . . . and yet if she did that right now, her aunt would be bristling away and telling her she was perfectly all right and didn't like to be fussed over.

It wasn't easy being at Merrowporth any more, she acknowledged a few days later. Any closeness she and Ashley had enjoyed seemed to have vanished. She didn't see too much of him. He was either busy with the horses or off on his own pursuits that she suspected more often than not included seeing Stephanie. The enchantment she has felt at being on the wild and rugged moors that she loved had disappeared like the morning mist. She felt as deflated as a burst balloon.

"The weather's certainly deteriorated fast," Rennie grumbled over coffee one morning. "The mist hardly seems to lift until midday now, does it?"

"It's not the weather to see Cornwall at its best," Corinne agreed.

"Some like it like this, of course. Ashley, for instance. He finds it quite exhilarating to ride over the moors in the mist."

"I'd have thought it was foolhardy," Corinne said tartly. "And not his thing at all to be risking life and limb."

"Ah, but he keeps to the footpath."

"Pity the poor walkers then, suddenly finding a horse rearing up in front of them!"

Rennie looked at her thoughtfully as she flipped through the pages of a local magazine without really seeing them.

"What's wrong, Corinne? You're as edgy as glass."

"Why wouldn't I be?" she muttered. "I'm beginning to feel claustrophobic, Rennie. And it's nothing to with the mist outside. It's here—this house—*him*. I'm trapped, and I want to get out—and I can't."

She suddenly crumpled, her face flushed and tearful. God, this wasn't what she'd intended to happen at all, she thought weakly, but suddenly Rennie's arms were around her, and she was crying like a baby against her chest.

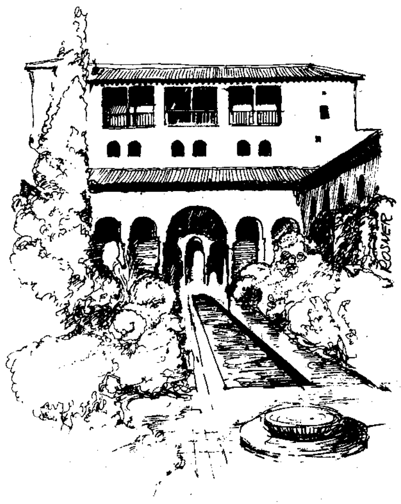
"Poor Corinne, is it so awful? I had no idea you felt like this. I'd thought for a time—well, you and Ashley did seem to hit it off pretty well now and then, and I'd hoped you could have stayed together permanently."

"That's hardly likely. He can't stand the sight of me now that I've helped him accomplish what he intended."

"And how about you?" Rennie said softly.

"Me! I loath him. I wish I'd never agreed to this farce in the first place." Her mouth trembled, and she looked at Rennie with blurred eyes. "No," she whispered."I don't loathe him, only it's better for my self-respect if I keep telling myself that I do."

"Come on," Rennie said briskly. "Some more strong coffee for you, my girl, and then how about he two of us driving into Truro this afternoon to do some shopping instead of stagnating here?"



"All right," Corinne agreed with the ghost of a smile, and Rennie put the kettle on again. She dried her eyes quickly as she heard Ashley coming indoors, stamping his feet as the morning dew clung to his boots in cobwebby strands. She bent her head over the magazine so he wouldn't see her flushed face.

"Good—coffee," he said briefly. "Just what I can do with. It's nippy out there today. You two look pretty cozy anyway."

He looked more sharply at Corinne as her hands suddenly froze over the pages of the magazine as the smiling faces of Harvey Newsome and his expensive new love gazed out at her under the forthcoming wedding announcements. She caught her breath sharply as she realized the wedding was to take place this very Saturday.

"Someone you know?" Ashley's voice said evenly over her shoulder. She glared up into his face. He knew, she thought at once. Her very attitude had given her away, together with the deepening flush staining her cheeks.

"Someone I used to know," she commented, her voice tight. "Someone who once meant a great deal to me."

"I see." He took the cup of coffee Rennie offered, his tone as curt as hers.

She could practically read his mind. If she'd been that fond of Harvey, then it only added to the certainty in Ashley's book, she thought, that she was a gold-digger, agreeing to this marriage of convenience just for what she could get out of it.

She stumbled to her feet. Every time he came near her lately she felt she had to get away from him fast. It was either that or she'd be rushing into his arms and confessing to him that she loved him to distracton, and she had too much pride for that.

"I'm going upstairs to tidy my room, Rennie," she said quickly. "I'll be down in time for lunch. What time are you planning to go in to Truro?"

"Oh, around two-ish, love.Whenever we're ready. Did you want anything while we're there, Ashley?"

"No, thank you. Don't hurry back on my account either. I'm having dinner with Steph and her father tonight. The old man's keen to know all about Italy—seems he was somewhere around Grandmother's part of it during the war."

It was stupid to care, she told herself as she hurried upstairs. Stupid and pointless. But she might as well tell the sea not to ebb and flow as deny the fact that she was burning up with jealousy because he made no secret of the fact that he was seeing Stephanie while he was still married to her.

Almost without thinking what she was doing, she pulled her suitcase down from the top of her wardrobe and started throwing clothes inside. At the moment, there was no clear idea in her head of where she was going, but of one thing she was sure. She had to get away from here, and right now, today.

Rennie glanced at her set face as she drove the last few miles into Truro, her own homely face troubled.

"I don't think you're doing the right thing, going off like this, Corinne. Ashley will be very upset when he gets back tonight and finds you've gone off without telling him—"

"It has to be this way, Rennie. I'm sorry. But I don't think he'll care. He'll be glad to get rid of me now he doesn't need me any more," she said bitterly.

"But where are you going? To your aunt's cottage?" She tried to get the truth out of Corinne.

"I just don't know. I doubt it. Aunt Jessie made it plain she wanted to be left alone. Just let me work things out in my own way, Ren, please. I may spend a few days in a hotel and I've still got friends in Somerset, you know, and I might even see if my old apartment is still available."

"You're going back to Somerset then?" Rennie sounded exasperated. "Surely you can tell me, love. I should have an address in case I want to contact you for anything."

Corinne looked at her bleakly.

"Why should you want to do that? You surely don't think Ashley will try to get me back? And when he decides the marriage is to be dissolved, he'd better put another ad in a magazine, hadn't he? I just might happen to read it. There can't be many men asking for a runaway wife to contact them just so they can get a quick divorce!"

She wished Rennie wouldn't keep on at her. She didn't want to talk about it. She only knew she couldn't keep up the pretense of being Ashley's wife any longer. She couldn't bear his indifference any longer.

Rennie drew the car to a halt at the station and put her hand over Corinne's for a moment. Her eyes were moist.

"I won't try to dissuade you any more, my love, though I wish with all my heart you weren't going away like this. Perhaps you'll get in touch when you're settled?"

"Perhaps. I'm sorry, Ren." She hugged the other woman with a little rush of affection, her throat thick. "Look, don't come into the station with me, please. I hate prolonged good-byes."

"And I may guess your destination, too," Rennie said ruefully.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Corinne said briefly. She kissed Rennie's cheek quickly, picked up her case, and walked away from her, feeling the tears welling up in her eyes again. As she went into the station, she turned briefly and saw Rennie preparing to drive away. She heaved a sigh of relief and moved to the ticket section.

"There's a train due in half an hour," the man told her in a bored voice. "Change at Bristol Temple Meads. One way or return?"

"One way, please," she said woodenly. She stared at the ticket in her hand. One way to York . . . well, it was the obvious place to run to . . . hadn't she always run back to Aunt Jessie when her spirits were at their lowest?

It seemed an endless journey, and it was late evening by the time she eased her stiff limbs out of the train and crossed the bridge to the exit barrier. She walked across to a waiting taxi and gave him her aunt's address.

There was still a light downstairs when the taxi stopped, she saw with relief.

"Corinne!" Aunt Jessie's face was a picture of astonishment as she drew her niece inside the cottage. "My dear girl, what are you doing here? Isn't Ashley with you? And I told you there was absolutely no reason for you to concern yourself about me and these stupid tests the doctor insists on. It's only migraine and I keep telling him so, and I should be very cross with you . . . oh, Corinne, my dear. . . ."

At her aunt's remonstration, Corinne suddenly burst into tears, and sank onto a chair as her legs gave way beneath her. Aunt Jessie told her to sit tight while she brought her a glass of brandy and then made them both a strong cup of tea and sandwiches, and then demanded, quite gently for her, some explanations.

It was difficult to know where to begin, but once into it, Corinne found the words tumbling out, and her aunt's face was a changing picture of incredulity and disbelief.

"You always did let your heart rule your head, my love," she said practically. "You fell for Ashley's romantic story, thinking you'd be able to carry the whole thing off as if it was one more secretarial job. But what you didn't bargain for was falling in love with him."

"I didn't say that."

Aunt Jessie laughed softly. "You didn't have to. But was there no hope that he loved you, too?"

Corinne shook her head, feeling it spin a little after the brandy. Remembering with sudden sharp pain the night of the thunderstorm when she'd thought his comfort was a special form of love . . . but it had been just an unforeseen circumstance that had been so unexpected . . . but that wasn't love, she reminded herself. It was one more facet of the dangerous enchantment that had always existed between them.

"I was afraid you'd think I'd done a terrible thing," Corinne said guiltily. "After all, I did lie to you and accepted your beautiful wedding presents under false pretenses."

"Your letter wasn't entirely a lie, was it? I'd have guessed in a minute if you were marrying a man you didn't love, and the truth of that part shone through, Corinne. I take it you—er—had no need of the nightgown and negligee set I sent you then?"

Corinne suddenly giggled, a rare sound in her own head, she realized, and she told Aunt Jessie how she'd torn open the parcel with great eagerness in front of Ashley and Rennie, and the shock of seeing the filmy garments inside.

"I'll keep them anyway," she promised. "Someday I'll wear them for somebody's appreciation, if I'm lucky."

Though the thought of falling in love again when she had given all her heart to Ashley was beyond her. She turned her thoughts away from him quickly, before she started becoming maudlin again.

"But how about you?" she asked her

aunt with sudden concern. "All this talk of tests frightened me. Have you heard when you have to go to the hospital?"

Aunt Jessie snorted. "Lot of nonsense, if you ask me. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of forgetting the whole thing, though the doctor is adamant about it. He expects it will be in about a month. Are you staying for a while?"

"Yes, please! For good if you'll have me!"

"H'm. Until that restless nature of yours sends you off on another wild-goose chase after some exotic job or other, you mean!" She saw the stricken look that came over Corinne's face and patted her arm. "I'm only teasing, love. Of course, you'll stay. This is your home. Where else would you go?"

She'd thought she'd found the place for her restless nature to settle down at Merrowporth, but she knew she'd have to try to forget it ever happened, if it were possible.

"I'll have to find a job here, I suppose," she murmured tiredly.

"You'll do no such thing, at least not for a while. You need to relax by the look of you, my girl. You're as tense as a bowstring, and I'll hear no talk of working until you're properly fit. Besides, you can look after me in my dotage."

"Oh, Aunt Jessie, that'll be the day, when you need looking after!" She began to laugh.

It was good to relax a little in the pretty little cottage she knew so well. Sleeping in her old room with the dormer window and the chintz bedspread and curtains and the dark old furniture that gleamed with her aunt's diligent polishing.

There was no word from Ashley. Not that she had expected there would be, and it was better this way. He would certainly guess that she'd come here, and he could get her aunt's telephone number and full address easily enough through directory inquiries.

The letter from the hospital arrived one Monday morning. Corinne picked it up with a little lurch of her heart and handed it to Aunt Jessie.

"Now don't get all het up," she told her calmly. "It's me who's going to the lion's den, not you. Ah," she scanned the printed page quickly. "Next week then. Tuesday at ten-thirty. And then you can stop worrying about me."

Corinne felt her face color, knowing she'd been monitoring her aunt's movements as if she expected her to collapse at any minute. Illogically, she'd have given anything right then to have Ashley's arms to run to, to hear his arrogant voice telling her of course her aunt was going to be all right.

"I'm not worrying about you," she told her aunt resolutely, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I'm quite sure you'll be around to boss me about for a long time yet!"

Even so, Corinne admitted to herself that it was an anxious few days while her aunt was in hospital. The cottage seemed so empty without her forceful, busy personality to fill it, and the hours were long, apart from the afternoon and evening visiting, and even then Aunt Jessie told her it was silly to go all the way to York to see her so often, when there was nothing at all wrong with her, and the doctors were beginning to agree with her.

"Mind you, they say it so reluctantly, it's obvious they were just waiting to carve me up," she said eloquently to Corinne.

"Aunt Jessie, you shouldn't say such things. They'll hear you," she hissed.

"I've already told them what I think, so there's no point in whispering. Anyway, they say I can go home tomorrow afternoon, so you can come and fetch me about four o'clock if you like."

Corinne's mouth widened in a delighted smile.

"Oh, that's wonderful," she said, in a flood of relief. "I didn't realize how much I'd miss you, and the cottage seems so quiet with only one person in it."

And it gave her too much time to think, she added silently. But she left the hospital with a lighter step than usual that evening, and took the bus back on the winding journey to the village. It was dark when she arrived and the telephone was ringing. She ran to answer it, expecting it to be yet another of Aunt Jessie's friends inquiring after her.

"Corinne?"

Her voice gave a giant leap in her chest as she heard Ashley's strong voice with the trace of Cornish accent that had so fascinated her when she'd first heard it. The wild color surged into her face, and she felt herself gripping the telephone cord. It was such an appallingly bad line she had to speak twice before he could understand the huskiness in her voice.

"I'm sorry to have to get in touch with you," he said in a curiously flat tone. "But since you were so fond of Grandmother. . . ."

"Oh, no," she whispered, with a little catch in her throat. "So soon?"

"I had a telephone call yesterday to inform me that she died peacefully in the early hours of the morning. My Aunt Carlotta says the funeral will be in a week's time. She is under the impression there may be something specifically for you in Grandmother's will."

"Oh, no!" she repeated, this time her voice aghast. "Not me, Ashley. It will be for your wife. She must have made the proviso a long time ago!"

"You *are* my wife," he said abruptly. She stared at the phone with burning eyes. His wife? It was what every fiber of her yearned to be, but not in this mockery of a marriage. The emotions she fought hard to control suddenly bubbled up inside her.

"Oh, Ashley, that marvelous old lady," she wept. "And I was feeling so relieved a few minutes ago before you phoned. Aunt Jessie is in the hospital, but the tests have all proved negative, thank goodness. I feel almost guilty to be so happy about that, now that I know about Grandmother."

"Don't be silly," his voice wavered and crackled on the line. "She wouldn't have wanted you feeling sad for her, Corinne. She'd had a wonderful life, and lived every minute of it. She confided in me that she sensed a kindred spirit in you, by the way, so she'd expect you to show her kind of courage right now and not go to pieces on account of her."

"How can I help feeling sad?" she wept. "I never felt so alone in my life as I do right at this minute. I need somebody strong beside me, and I wish Aunt Jessie was here. I don't have any kind of courage, Ashley."

"It took some courage to marry a man you didn't know and agree to his impossible terms, didn't it?"

She smiled crookedly into the phone. What did it matter; now Grandmother was dead, and presumably he'd have everything he wanted once the will was read.

"I could never have agreed to it if I hadn't . . . only I didn't really recognize what my reasons were," she was babbling, as she suddenly realized she was in danger of blurting out that she had fallen in love with him at first sight, but she still had some remnants of pride left.

"Will you and Rennie be going over to Italy again then?" she said quickly.

"Yes, but not until after the weekend. . . ." The line suddenly crackled fiercely and his voice was breaking up so much she couldn't hear the rest of his words. She shouted into the phone and shook it in frustration, and then it went dead. She stared at it as if it were a lifeline, replaced it, and slid to the carpeted floor beside it as all the strength went out of her. She buried her face in her arms and allowed herself the luxury of weeping for an old lady she had known for such a little while, and yet who had been such an important part of her life.

Eventually she pulled herself together, made some coffee and toast, and went to bed. She slept fitfully, dreaming wild, impossible dreams of Ashley holding out his arms to her, and of herself running toward them, only to find them forever just out of reach. It was about five o'clock in the morning when the sound of a car door slamming woke her with a jerk of alarm. Her first thought went to Aunt Jessie as she heard the footsteps coming toward the cottage door, and the sharp hammering on the door. She leapt out of bed and pulled her housecoat over her thin nightgown, rushing downstairs with her heart in her mouth. She stood gaping disbelievingly as she threw open the door to find Ashley standing there, his eyes wild and red-rimmed, hair disheveled and face unshaven, looking as if he'd just shrugged into his sheepskin coat over his jeans and sweater and driven through the night.

"Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to ask me in?" he said impatiently, his face unsmiling.

She moved back to let him in and closed the door quickly as the chill of early morning followed him. She bent quickly and turned on the electric fire, bringing an instant glow to the room by its leaping flames. She shivered, with more than just the cold she felt at leaving a warm bed as he threw off his coat and tossed it on a chair, and then took her, without any preliminaries, into his arms.

"I want to finish the little conversation we started on the phone when that terrible line cut us off," he stated. She stared into his dark eyes, feeling his strength, loving him.

"And for that you drove all the way to Yorkshire?" she stuttered.

His finger suddenly touched the curve of her mouth in a tender gesture.

"I'd have driven to Timbuktu and back to get the right answers from you."

"I don't know the question—"

"Yes, you do." His voice suddenly softened. "I'm asking you if you love me, Corinne. I have to know."

She felt a sudden flare of anger inside her.

"Why?" she said tautly. "So you can go on crowing about it? You were never slow at making it perfectly plain that you never loved me and that our marriage was one of convenience to you. That was all you wanted, wasn't it? We struck a bargain and I never fooled myself that what you felt for me was love, so if you've got any anxious ideas that I've fallen for you and I'm going to make waves now that your grandmother is dead and try to claim something for myself, you can forget it."

She hardly paused for breath, and his mouth suddenly clamped down over hers, stopping the flow of words. She could feel the tension in him as he held her close, and suddenly her arms wound themselves around him as if they had separate lives of their own.

"You talk too much," he said harshly, when he finally raised his lips from hers. "And what in God's name did you mean by running off like that and driving me demented with worry? I've nearly driven Rennie mad these last weeks, but she was so insistent you didn't want to be found, that you have to do your own thing. and I was half-convinced you still wanted that bloke whose photo you were looking at in the magazine."

"I never did want him the way I—" Her face colored as the words rushed out, and she was aware that he was standing very still. He tipped her chin up with his hand, so that she had to meet his eyes with her own.

"The way you what?" he said intently. "The way you wanted me?"

She swallowed. She said nothing, but she didn't need to. Her eyes were saying it all.

# *NEXT MONTH IN CAMEO*

## *TWO GREAT NOVELS*

*A contemporary romantic novel of suspense*

### PERIL IN THE SHADOWS

*by Annecy Scott*

Jan and her small son adored the estate they had unexpectedly inherited and were determined to salvage it by turning it into a beach resort. But why was someone trying to demolish it—and them? And what was Adam Dexter's role? Prospective lover, rescuer or attacker?

*A Victorian romance*

### EMMA

*by Clare Frances Holmes*

For all of her eighteen years, Emma had lived in the mansion at Swanbrook Park but in a status no better than a servant's; now, with a new world at her command, she has to decide between two suitors and if the man she has always loved is out to defraud and betray her

"And love?" he went on huskily. And there was something in the way he was looking down at her that sent a thrill of hope inside her.

"Don't you think it's about time you started answering your own questions?" she said shakily.

He gave a sudden small laugh, his lips very close to hers.

"You crazy little idiot, I've loved you from the first moment we met, when you sat opposite me in that hotel in Truro, trying not to look too shocked when you heard my proposal, as if it happened every day of the week. I resisted the idea of falling in love with you, of course, unwilling to believe such a thing could be happening to me. I'd had my share of women, or so I thought—and love at first sight is for kids, not for mature people like us." He laughed shortly. "Perhaps that's why it has the power to hit you so hard when you're perfectly sure you're no longer vulnerable."

She was still reeling with the shock of all he was saying.

"But you've been so cold toward me all this time . . . well, most of the time," she added.

"How else could I have got through the fact of seeing you so close every day of my life without pretending coldness? I'd just have frightened you off, and that was the last thing I wanted. But I expected you to see through me every minute, Corinne. Sometimes it was sheer hell having you around, and at other times it was pure heaven."

"And—and what about Stephanie?" She had to know everything.

"Stephanie was never in the running," he said with his usual arrogance that suddenly made her smile. "Her father and mine were in the last war together, and he like to tell me about his reminiscences. I was about the only young person who'd listen to them, apparently. So when are you going to answer my question?" he demanded abruptly.

"Which question was that?" she teased him breathlessly.

"Do you love me or don't you?" He almost glared down at her, and she suddenly capitulated, melting against

# CAMEO
# LOVE SIGNS

by Phoebe Matthews

### SAGITTARIUS NOV. 22-DEC. 21

The December sun sparkles in your sign like light reflected on a snowy field, bringing happiness to your endeavors, enhancing your personal wealth, and burning away that dark, confusing problem that has haunted you these past months. Your Sagittarius beauty will twinkle like a fragile holiday ornament when you add a touch of gold to your costume. If your loved ones or a close friend do not seem to share your bubbling party spirit, keep your extravagant tendencies in check, helping disagreements to pass as quickly as melting snowflakes. Kind Venus sends a remembrance to warm your tender heart sometime after the 19th. *Romantic days: 7, 17, 22.*

### CAPRICORN DEC. 22-JAN. 20

Sinister Mars casts its shadow in your path this month. Use caution when you journey out and remember that winter ice, like love at first sight, can be a dazzling hazard. Although you have much on your mind now, you must force yourself to be forgiving, or else a thoughtless message will cause you unnecessary heartache. Dry away your tears, graceful Capricorn, dress in bright holly red and let your friends enjoy your radiant holiday charm. After the 9th you will find your faltering spirit lifting as the sun warms you like a cheering fire after a walk in the snowy winter woods. Romantic Venus lends her starbright sparkle to your love life. *Romantic days: 18, 22, 26.*

### AQUARIUS JAN. 21-FEB. 19

When hostile Mars sends conflict into an area of your life that you thought was calmed, subdue your independent nature and turn to friends who can be trusted to give comfort and affection. Follow the loving advice given you after the 6th by one who truly cares. Venus could be your lucky star this month, fulfilling your wishes concerning a longed-for treasure. Don't let some temporary unhappiness with your lover trouble your kind Aquarian heart; it will melt away like icicles on a sunny day before the New Year gaiety begins. When out on a romantic walk in the softly drifting snow, wrap up warmly in a snuggly cranberry scarf to complement your mysterious femininity. *Romantic days: 4, 20, 24.*

### PISCES FEB. 20-MARCH 20

Quicksilver Mercury lends exuberance to your holiday mood while bringing guidance from a cherished friend. Your own Pisces intuition should tell you to accept this advice and make your own decision about a midwinter journey you've been planning. If you can overcome your tendency towards pessimism, the winter sun will melt away your doubts as surely as it melts away the snow. Allow your imagination to reach out and find the way to the star of success. Although troublesome Mars now entangles a long-awaited inheritance in a web of bewilderment, a sensitive romantic interlude after the 23rd will lift your spirits like champagne bubbles drifting upwards in a glass. A touch of crystal jewelry adds drama to your Pisces flair. *Romantic days: 1, 14, 22.*

### ARIES MAR. 21-APR. 19

The December sun shines kindly on your winter holiday taken at the beginning of the month, while generous Venus brings you a special remembrance to brighten your celebrations. After the 16th you will feel ready to succeed in any project you pursue. Keep your patience with an old lover who causes worries towards month's end, because any Aries rashness on your part could threaten a relationship that you would later regret losing. Your bubbly personality continues to enchant that someone who is enchanting you, as surely as the twinkling stars in the winter sky spellbind lovers who stroll through the evening snow. Dress in glittering black to add that touch of sophistication to your Aries sparkle. *Romantic days: 2, 24, 29.*

### TAURUS APR. 20-MAY 20

Although wanderlust may tempt you now, stay close to the crackling warmth of your own hearth rather than the swirling snows of distant destinations. A cherished dream may seem beyond reach, yet after the 19th an opportunity could open for you, if you pull in your stubborn chin and meet an adversary halfway. The winter sun brings a gift from a long-forgotten friend, wrapped in ribbons of affection. Lucky Venus adds treasure to your holiday with a happy settlement of some misunderstanding with your darling. Deep midnight blue adds glamour to your holiday attire as you continue to add Taurus joy to the lives of those near you. *Romantic days: 4, 18, 27.*

him with a little sigh of sweet surrender.

"I think I've always loved you," she whispered against him. "Oh, Ashley, I love you so much."

She couldn't say any more because he was kissing her over and over, and she was kissing him back, more deliriously happy than she'd known it possible to be. But at last she pulled back a little from his embrace.

"Ashley, we shouldn't be this happy, with Aunt Jessie in hospital, and your grandmother . . . oh, your grandmother. . . ."

He pulled her back into his arms, holding her close.

"Aunt Jessie would be rejoicing, and as for Grandmother . . . don't you think she'd have wanted us to be happy and not mourn for her, darling? Don't you think she'd be thrilled to know she brought us together in the first place, and that now she'd be doing the same thing again? If I know Grandmother, she'd be saying right now that there's nothing more important in this world than love, and she'd be giving us her blessing."

Yes, she thought. He was exactly right. Grandmother might almost be there in the room with them right now, giving them her blessing. . . . As she raised her face to his kisses again, she felt happiness run through her like a flame, knowing there were no more barriers between them.

"As soon as Aunt Jessie is back home and settled in again, we must see about going home." Ashley's voice was soft against her cheek.

"Home to Merrowporth—" She caught her breath, feeling the sting of tears in her eyes, for she'd never expected to see it again, and Ashley had been right about that, too. She had fallen in love with the house, but not nearly as much as with the man.

"It shouldn't seem so unusual for a man to take his wife home with him, my darling," he said, looking deep into her eyes. "And you are my wife, aren't you, my beautiful Corinne? And intending to stay that way, for always?"

"Yes." The word was little more than a sigh of contentment. "Oh, yes . . . for always, darling!"

◆

## DECEMBER 1980

**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Beguiling Venus lends a touch of her mystic energy to brighten your mood even though that cherished winter holiday continues to be out of reach. A worrisome conflict over another's wealth soon melts away as greetings from special friends and loved ones bring warmth and laughter to your kind Gemini heart. Although the maddening moon casts ominous shadows on your romance shortly after December 2nd, the benevolent sun offers to calm the tempest between you and your beloved if you try harder to be sympathetic about a problem you cannot fully understand. Just as tinsel lends gaiety to the party decorations, the sparkle of silver in your costume should put you in the holiday spirit. *Romantic days: 3, 20, 29.*

**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Unfortunately, this month wicked, warring Mars brings tension between you and the man who loves you the most. If you use your Cancer sensitivity and patience and try to understand why he reacts the way he does, the tender romance that once seemed fragile as December snowflakes, could grow under the loving glow of Venus. Do not trust a premonition based on a memory from the distant past. Instead, use your wisdom to guide a new situation that will begin sometime after the 22nd. Despite your fears, success continues to glow on your horizon. The icy blue shimmer of winter reflections suits the calm exterior you would like to show the world and flatters your natural Cancer sophistication. *Romantic days: 4, 10, 18.*

**LEO** JULY 23-AUG. 22

Your Leo generosity continues throughout the holidays, with the color of champagne a natural background for your bubbling personality. Passionate Venus brings about a change in an affair that is close to your home and heart, while the kindly sun disentangles a romantic love knot. For now, at least, your love troubles could melt away like snowflakes on a sunny afternoon, if you remember to choose your words as carefully as you choose the ornaments for your holiday decorations. Keep your opinions cheerful and flattering. Although some friends you depend on may disappoint you, on the 25th your warm Leo heart will rise above these hurts and you will gain a cherished wish. *Romantic days: 7, 12, 24.*

**VIRGO** AUG. 23-SEPT. 22

Don't let frustration darken your holidays as you try to solve the problems of caring for a loved one. Rather, trust your intuition and let the joy you have brought in the past continue to bloom into today's happiness. Around your hearth your friends' worries melt away like ice exposed to fire, as you cheer the hearts of those who depend on you. Although the silver that you need to indulge your love of gift-giving seems out of reach, wise Mercury delivers a special love message to brighten your holidays. If romantic misunderstandings continue to swirl around you like falling snow, Venus promises clearer skies after the 21st, when love will sparkle like the morning star on your horizon and royal purple will match your regal beauty. *Romantic days: 9, 22, 27.*

**LIBRA** SEPT. 23-OCT. 23

The mystical moon lingers in your sign twice this month, setting your Libra soul to dreaming of romance, despite the confusion that continues in your love life. To yourself you seem like a traveler caught in a blizzard, lost from your life's pathway. Although trouble swirls around you, and dreams of escape fade away, you have friends who could comfort you if you cease your vacillating. Decide you have to be the one to clear up misunderstandings that have caused foolish heartaches, and use all your Libra tact to avoid conflict around the 29th. Although silvery Venus cannot brush away all your lovers' quarrels, she does increase your wealth now. Enhance your special beauty with snowy touches of winter white. *Romantic days: 3, 16, 30.*

**SCORPIO** OCT. 24-NOV. 21

Glamorous Venus adds charm to your natural magnetism, making you shine like a lodestar for your friends. The dark pine greens, with their rich fragrances, make an enchanting background for your lively Scorpio beauty. Although personal wealth continues to expand, wily Mars could cause disastrous confusion and bruised feelings among your loved ones unless you are willing to forgive someone who needs your help. Let your generous Scorpio nature reach out to find a new approach to solving conflicts after the 4th. Towards the close of the old year, your troubled heart will have to choose between a cherished old love and a romantic new attachment. *Romantic days: 5, 18, 28.*

# IN THE WIND

## News about Books, Programs, Events

by Louise Apfelbaum

With the Christmas season rapidly approaching, romance is more than ever in the wind and CAMEO has some wonderful ideas to brighten your festive holiday occasions and bring joy into your life.

**Christmas: New Ideas for An Old-Fashioned Celebration** has suggestions for inexpensive, personalized presents you can make with your own creative touch: potpourri sachets, dried-flower or shell pictures, and recipes for gifts from your autumn harvest. This lovely book abounds with ideas for Christmas decorations and holiday entertaining that include recipes and a dozen little-known Christmas carols. *(Potter, $12.95)*

The **Gnomes Calendar 1981** features fascinating paintings suitable for framing *(Abrams, $6.95)*. Another source for charming calendars, as well as for holiday cards, games and other gifts is **UNICEF**. Proceeds from just one pack of cards provides enough vaccine to immunize thirty-five children against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus. Christmas is an especially important time to remember children, and **UNICEF** has a 24-hour toll-free number for information about their catalogue of products: 1-800-331-1000; Oklahoma residents only: 914-664-8300.

Christmas is also an especially romantic time to remember the man in your life and CAMEO has found some lovely gift suggestions. *The National Air and Space Museum* has a fascinating calendar for 1981, **Air and Space.** *(Abrams, $8.95)*

**The Old-House Journal Compendium** is another fascinating gift that would make a delightful and useful addition to the library of anyone interested in owning, or remodeling a home built before 1920. With over 800 black-and-white illustrations, including old prints and snapshots, this book is not only a practical source for information, but plain fun to browse through, too. *(Overlook Press, $19.95)*

When some of the bustle of shopping and entertaining has tapered off, you can look forward to quiet and relaxing evenings in front of the television. PBS has scheduled **The Dancing Princesses** for Thursday, December 4, at 7:00 p.m. A Grimm's fairy tale danced by the Royal Ballet, this is the story of a soldier who discovers the secret place where six princesses wear out their slippers dancing all night.

PBS has also scheduled **A Christmas Special** with Luciano Pavarotti singing seasonal favorites, also December 4, at 8:00 p.m. Then, at 9:10 p.m., Victor Borge will present a special entitled **Comedy in Music.** PBS will also air **The Student Prince**, a musical film featuring the voice of Mario Lanza, on November 29, at 11:00 p.m.

NBC has wonderful family favorites scheduled for the season. **The Bob Hope Special** returns again this year, as well as **The Dean Martin Christmas Show** and **The Osmond Family Christmas Show**.

Kate Mulgrew, the star of **Ryan's Hope**, will feature in **A Time For Miracles**, on ABC in December. Jim Henson, the creator of The Muppets, will celebrate Christmas with a new show: **Emmett Otter's Jug Band Christmas**, hosted by Kermit the Frog. ABC will also air Perry Como's **Christmas from Israel. Christmas at the Grand Ole Opry** will be filmed in Nashville, starring, among others, Jerry Reid and Barbara Mandrel.

Finally, we at CAMEO wish you a wonderful holiday, and lots of love.

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# A Rose In Amazonia

*(Continued from page 16)*

village. Follina, it's called. He didn't live long to enjoy it, poor devil. I got it for a song and I've made a water garden, an arboretum. . . ."

Yes, he would do that, thought Nina. She remembered how he'd bought a packet of seeds once—mignonette, they were—and they'd wandered through the courtyards of the Hofburg scattering them in the cracks in the pavement. She had been surprised and enchanted that someone so wild and masculine should care so much for flowers.

"I've brought trees in from all over Amazonia; there must be five hundred species. And I've made the house into a showplace. The furniture's mostly Louis XV, shipped from France. The chandeliers are Bohemian."

He was getting nowhere. To his infantile boasting she accorded only the quiet attention that was her hallmark.

"I wish you could see it," he said.

Ah, better. She had made a small movement of the head. Was she not going to see it, then?

"You are happy in the Amazon, Paul? You like it?"

He was silent. Then, forgetting his role, he began to quote the lines that the great Cervantes had written about the new world that was South America: "'. . . the refuge of all the poor devils of Spain, the sanctuary of the bankrupt, the safeguard of murderers, the promised land for ladies of easy virtue, a lure and disillusionment for the many—and an incomparable remedy for the few.'"

Nina had closed her eyes. "And you?" she said softly. "Have you found it to be that? An incomparable remedy?"

Paul did not reply. For him there had always been only one "incomparable remedy." This woman to whom he had committed himself wholly at their first meeting and whose absence had left him with a lifelong, ever undiminished sense of loss.

So now, on with the slaughter, for he saw that like himself she had kept faith. He had only to reach out and she would give it all up—the fame and adulation, the homage of the students who'd pulled her carriage through the Ringstrasse after her first *Bohème*, the bouquets glittering with diamond drops that besotted Hapsburg archdukes threw for her on stage.... If he mishandled the next few moments he would doom her to squalor and poverty, waiting for him to come out of prison if the trial went against him, friendless in this vile climate, in danger of every dread disease.

"You gave an incredible performance tonight."

She waved a hand. "No ... no. It was a mistake, Paul. I am—"

He interrupted her. "But I wondered why you wore a *white* rose? One would expect Carmen to wear *red* flowers, don't you think?"

There. He had done it. He had also, apparently, crushed the stem of his wine glass.

Nina looked down at her plate. Not to make a fuss, that was what mattered. Women lost their only sons in battle. Children starved. Paul had not loved her. Blindly she groped for her fork, speared a dark, unfocused object, conveyed it, with infinite care, to her mouth.

Even now perhaps she could do it. If she admitted to him that her voice was finished. He was so chivalrous, so kind.

Oh God, *no*!

Paul's glass had been replaced; the next course brought. His bleeding hand, wrapped in a napkin, was concealed beneath the table. Now to finish it off.

"Have some more wine, Nina. It'll give me an excuse to have some. Steffi always fusses when I get drunk."

"Steffi? Your ... wife?"

He shrugged. "We're not actually married—one doesn't bother out here. But she's been with me for a long time."

"What is she like?" Nina asked. She was speaking with great care now, like a small child reciting poetry.

Paul's mind shuddered to a halt. What indeed was she like? Had he ever, among the string of girls with which he'd tried to forget Nina, ever known a Steffi?

"Well, she's French ... dark curls ... a real minx but...."

He rambled on, creating an *ooh-la-la soubrette* from a fifth-rate operetta. ("You cannot believe me, Nina. You *cannot.* Tell me I'm lying; see through this idiot game.")

But she believed him. The modesty and selflessness he'd so much loved in her finished the job he had begun. It was over.

What followed was worse. Nina lifted her chin and took up, almost visibly, the mantle of prima donna and woman of the world. For exactly the time that politeness demanded, she made conversation, speaking amusingly of her travels, telling him bizarre and interesting stories of the stage. Then she rose, gave him her hand to kiss, sent her regards to Steffi.

"Steffi?" said Paul wildly, nearly ruining all.

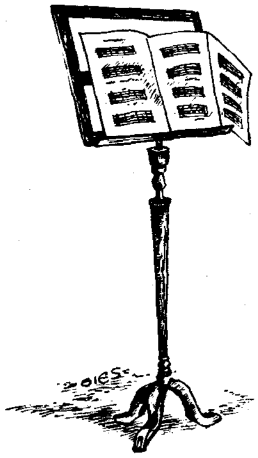
But the pain was beginning to take over now; she noticed nothing, and very erectly she walked down the gangway to where the hansom cab still waited—and was gone.

The next day, Nina fell ill. Jacob, who knew nothing of what had passed, was convinced that she was dying. He had read about swans who sing gloriously and then die and Nina, lying mute in her hotel room, managing to shiver at a temperature of ninety-five in the shade, seemed a good candidate for death. He found an understudy, placated the manager of the opera house, consulted a Portuguese doctor who offered him a choice of lethal tropical diseases and suggested he cut the *diva*'s waist-length, still golden hair.

Jacob refused. He sat with her for three days and nights, remembering for the first time in ages that he had a wife in Linz who ran his leather-goods business and made the best Linzertorte in Lower Austria.

Nina, however, did not die. On the fourth day she got up, apologized, kissed Jacob, and prepared for the journey home. Neither of them mentioned her voice, for both knew that she would never sing again.

So now she stood again at the rail of the steamer, erect and careful but with a new gesture, her arms folded across the bodice of her dress as if to stop the pain escaping and troubling others with its intensity. They reached the "Wedding of the Waters" and began to steam down the "River Sea" ...



After a while Jacob came over to stand beside her. He must make her speak, listen, *anything.*

"You never asked where I found your white rose," he said.

She flinched but, as always, answered gently. "No. Where did you get it?"

"It was quite an adventure," said Jacob proudly. "I think perhaps it was the only white rose in Amazonia. I tried everywhere and then I met an Indian who had been employed as a gardener on one of the great estates. The man who owned it had left—he's gone bankrupt and faces a prison charge, too, poor devil. But the Indian swore there was a special place on the estate, where the owner used to grow white roses. Apparently he made a great fuss about doing it—it's very difficult to grow roses here."

Nina's voice seemed to come from a long way off. "What was it called, this place?"

"Follina. An Italian built it after some *palazzo* in—"

He broke off. Nina had clasped his shoulders. She was looking at him as if he were wreathed in unutterable majesty and her eyes were the eyes of a young girl.

"Again, Jacob, please. Tell me again what happened there. *Everything.*"

Not all great loves, faithfully kept, end in tragedy. Nina returned to find Paul, hunched and despairing, by the river's edge. She saw his face as he watched her come toward him—and knew why she had been born. His prison sentence was minimal. She waited. They returned to Follina to begin again. Nor had they been mistaken: Each found in the other the "incomparable remedy" they had sought.

No, if there was a tragedy, it was that of Jacob Kindinsky, who had adored Nina and now returned to Linz. But a passer-by—seeing him on his veranda above the Danube, spooning whipped cream onto his Linzertorte and listening to the clink of the cash register as his wife chatted to the customers in the shop below—might think that, as tragedies go, it was ... well, endurable. Soon, too, he would write a book that would take the operatic world by storm. He had the title ready: *The Diva with a Rose.*

# Lucy Grey

A CAMEO NOVEL

(Continued from page 22)

jacket. "Forgive me, my dear," she said sweetly, "but I understood that your father had but recently been taken from you."

"My father died nearly a year ago," I told her bluntly, impatient with her prevaricating, "and I removed my black sometime ago. He would not have wished me to continue a show of mourning for him when I remember him every day."

"Indeed. Of course, I can understand your feelings. What woman does not long for pretty colors at such a time? But really, my dear Louise, you must be a little careful of the conventions. The society in which we move demands circumspection, and while I would be the first to say you must do as you wish, I really feel that a little restraint in such matters would be wise. Of course no one here can possibly know you; I daresay that there will be no need to mention the fact that your father has lately died."

"And it was such a good excuse for my not having visited you before," I said, with a passable attempt at imitating her sweetness of tone.

Mrs. Heath closed her eyes and decided to ignore my sally. "You perform upon the pianoforte of course?" she said brightly after a while.

"No. I am not at all musical."

"Such a pity. We used to have musical evenings when the children were all here. Harry would play upon the piano while Isobel sang. And Giles has a very fine voice, too."

There was silence except for the tinkling of teaspoons, and then she spoke again. "And you have brought little Henry with you? How I long to see the sweet babe."

"Hal is five, Mrs. Heath," I told her stolidly, "and you have only to ring for his company, as he is in the nursery, which I suppose is no great distance away."

Her smile grew frosty. "I think it best that he should be allowed to recover from the journey first. I will send for him tomorrow."

Having no intention of his being frightened by this formidable woman, I informed her that the next day I would bring him myself and stood up, brushing crumbs from my lap. "If you'll excuse me, Marm," I said, "I will go and see that he is comfortable. You must know, being a mother yourself, how a child needs the maternal presence at times." And with this parting shot, I left the room and climbed the stairs to the nursery.

Finding Hal in full gallop upon a magnificent rocking horse while Betsy set out towels and nightclothes around the hearth, I ruffled his thick blonde curls.

"What a marvelous animal," I admired his mount. "Have you ridden him far?"

"Miles and miles," he told me happily plunging back and forth. "He was Sir Giles's, and now he's mine."

"Sir Giles had tea here, ma'am," Betsy supplied, and I did my best to hide my surprise.

"Yes! He says I am to have a pony and a governess," Hal went on importantly. "I shall like a pony," he announced and then glanced up at me, pausing in his rocking, "but what's a governess? Is it nice?"

"A governess is a lady who teaches," I explained, "but I think you are much too young for one and I shall explain that to Sir Giles."

Soon after, recalling that I would be expected to change for dinner, I left the nursery and sought my own room. The maid had unpacked most of my things and two dresses were laid out on the bed, their voluminous skirts pressed free of creases.

Ringing the bell for Maggie, I struggled out of my traveling clothes, and with her help was soon dressed in a rose-pink taffeta gown. Pinning on the wide "Bertha" collar of heavy lace, I glanced in the mirror as the girl put the finishing touches to my hair and smiled at her reflection.

"Does your father work on the estate?"

"He's a groom, miss—we live in the gate house."

"And you have brothers and sisters?"

"Seven, miss. I'm the eldest."

"I shall look forward to seeing your family," I said and dismissed her, crossing to the window after she had gone. A gentle breeze stirred the curtains, bringing with it all the half-forgotten country smells of my grandparents' home in Dorset. Closing my eyes, I leaned against the window frame and remembered the times during my childhood when father and mother had been sent abroad, leaving me behind in the kinder climate of England.

Suddenly the richness of the room and opulent house was oppressive. Snatching up a shawl, I flung it about my shoulders and fled the room. I hurried along the wide empty corridors and quietly glided down the shallow staircase. Catching sight of long windows open to the floor, I crossed through them and found myself on a flagstoned terrace.

The evening sun still held warmth and I let the shawl fall back from my shoulders. The wide, smooth expanse of lawn ended against a cluster of trees and shrubs, and the flower beds were filled with blooms of every color, nodding their heavy heads against the evening breeze.

"There is time for a stroll," said a voice behind me. I turned quickly to find that Sir Giles had followed me out onto the terrace.

"I should like that," I replied honestly, accepting the offer of his arm as he led the way down a shallow flight of stone steps onto a gravel path. The heavy perfume of roses filled the air; my companion plucked a bloom of almost the same color as my gown and presented it to me.

We continued on past the corner of the house. "I must thank you for taking the bother to see Hal," I began. "It was kind of you."

He shrugged carelessly. "He seems an intelligent child. I'm afraid he'll find it lonely here."

"Are there no others with whom he could be friends?"

"I daresay—I'll ask my mother what the local prospects are."

"Forgive me for being curious—my husband never did explain . . . I suppose your mother married again. But, if so, what happened to Mr. Heath?"

"Father died some years ago, and mother—I call her Beatie—married a gentleman adventurer—never let him be called a merchant! He had estates and plantations in the West Indies. Unfortunately, upon one of his periodic visits there, the ship on which he traveled foundered within sight of the port."

"Poor Mrs. Grey—Heath."

"Her grief was lightened by the fact that he left a vast fortune behind him."

I did not care for such cynicism. "It can have been of little compensation," I said coldly, and Sir Giles made a deprecating gesture.

"Forgive me—I should have remembered that you have been in similar circumstances."

Something in his voice made me glance up quickly to find there was no mistaking the sardonic gleam in his gaze. "When

Harry asked me to marry him he made it very clear that he had no expectations and only his Army pay to live on," I said hurriedly, biting back my sudden anger, my fingers closing tightly about the stem of the rose in my agitation. I gave an involuntary gasp of pain as a thorn entered my fingers.

"Let me see," Sir Giles commanded. The rose was removed from my hand and my palm stretched wide as he examined the tiny wound. Quickly the sharp thorn was extracted, and as a drop of blood welled up, my fingers were closed over a snowy handkerchief. Still clasping my hand, Sir Giles's eyes met mine, and he smiled, apparently forgetting the slight antagonism of a few moments before. "I have been meaning to broach a subject with you all day. 'Mrs. Grey' seems too formal among relatives. May I call you Cousin? My mother intends to introduce you to local society and doubtless there will be speculation as to why you have not been seen before. If we appear on friendly terms that will serve to calm the gossip."

"Call me what you will," I answered coolly. "We must not have talk at all costs."

"I assure you that it is not—nice—to be the object of local gossip."

"Never having been the object of gossip, I do not know. However, I am prepared to take your word for it. Though I had not thought you so careful of my comfort, Sir Giles," I told him sweetly.

For a moment he looked down at me, his mouth tight; but all he said was that dinner would be waiting. Then, turning me about, we marched back along the path with a quickened pace.

Dinner passed better than I had expected. To be sure, I found the presence of a footman and butler in the room to wait at table a little oppressive; but Mrs. Heath seemed to have set herself the task of playing the perfect hostess and, following her lead, even Sir Giles could not intimidate my spirit too much.

Not until he made his sudden announcement, that is.

"I shall take you to see my grandmother in the morning," he said casually, apparently unaware of the consternation he caused me. "And the boy can make his bow at the same time. Does that suit you?"

"Yes . . . of course," I answered quickly, avoiding his eyes. I remembered what Harry had told me of Lady Caroline Grey.

From his conversation I gathered she was the only one of his relations he really cared about . . . and also the only one whom he held in healthy respect, tinged a little with akin to fear. I understood that the old lady had ruled the world with an iron hand, not bothering to wear a velvet glove. And so, I looked forward to the forthcoming meeting with more apprehension.

About eleven the next morning, Maggie came to my room to tell me Lady Caroline was waiting. I went quickly to the nursery to collect Hal.

To my surprise, Sir Giles was already there, swinging one leg as he sat on the table to show my son the contents of a box of lead soldiers.

"Good morning, cousin Louise," he said coolly. "I trust you slept well."

"Very well, thank you," I replied.

Above Hal's fair head his eyes met mine. "Is Lady Caroline waiting?" he asked, and at my nod lifted Hal down from the table. "You can play later," he told him, tucking the small hand into his larger one, "but now you must meet your great-grandmama."

Lady Caroline's bedroom was at the front of the house, its tall windows showing a fine view across the sweeping lawns and tree-lined drive to the distant fields and hills beyond. Harry's grandmother had kept to the taste of her youth. The room was finished in the slender, elegant style of the Regency, so very different from the ornate, heavy type of furniture to which I was accustomed.

The curtains were drawn back, and on a velvet day bed in the center of a patch of sunlight lay a very old lady, swathed in coverlets and shawls.

At our entrance she looked up. Sir Giles crossed the floor to take one claw-like hand in his and touch it to his lips.

"Well, Giles—have you brought her?" she asked impatiently, "and the boy—Harry's son?"

"Yes, Grandmama, they are both here," he said, stretching an arm to bring us forward into her view.

Piercing violet eyes examined me, then fell to Hal clutching my skirt at my side, and her expression softened. "Come nearer, boy," she said, holding out her hand. Hal edged forward, eyeing her with equal curiosity.

Her fingers took his chin and turned his face toward the light. Suddenly his fair curls were a blaze of gold and Lady Caroline's mouth relaxed into a smile. "He's a picture of his father at the same age," she pronounced. "Why haven't you brought him to see me before?" she asked suddenly.

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*Life! What art thou without love?*

Edward Moore
Fables

"These things take time to arrange, Lady Carrie," Giles explained quickly. "Louise's father died only recently."

"Pooh," said his grandmother. "You think that shut away up here I don't know what's going on, but you're mistaken, young man. I remember that the marriage was unsuitable . . . but what's done can't be undone, however much we rue it. Now take this young scamp to look out of the window, while I speak to his Mama."

Giles obeyed and at her sharp gesture I sank down onto a low chair conveniently placed nearby.

"Well, gal," she said. "Tell me about yourself."

"I hardly know where to begin."

"At the beginning—where else! I know your father was an army doctor, what of your mother?"

"Her people were merchants," I told her boldly. "I'm afraid I have no connections."

The old lady's eyebrows shot up as she stared at me with her remarkable eyes. "Tch, tch," she said, "I can see why you set your mother-in-law's back up. I was born in a different age and have no objection to shop blood, so long as there's money as well. Are your grandparents wealthy?"

"I believe so, but unfortunately they cut off my mother when my father shocked them by taking a commission in the army."

Lady Caroline snorted, "Some people have strange ideas."

"They said it was a career suited only to idiots and aristocrats," I informed her demurely.

For a moment her violet eyes might have danced, but she only commented that given time she and I might get on. "Did Harry every mention me?" she asked.

"Often," I answered promptly, "and with great affection. He wondered why you never answered his letters."

The old lady looked up sharply. "Letters? What letters?"

"He wrote to you quite often," I told her gently, "and hoped that some day you would forgive him for going against your wishes in marrying me."

"I had no wishes in the affair. The first I knew was when it was all over and the knot was tied."

"But I am sure—" I began, but was interrupted by Sir Giles.

"You know Beatie is arranging a dinner, Grandmama, to introduce cousin Louise to society. Has she consulted you about the guests?"

Lady Caroline was diverted. "Indeed she has, and I pity the lot of you. A more boring, uninteresting group of idiots and nincompoops gathered under one roof I've yet to see. Sometimes I thank providence that I don't have to endure such hours of boredom any more." She caught my gaze upon her and this time a twinkle was very plain. "I've reached the age when I can say what I like," she explained. "No one thinks me rude anymore—just eccentric. They're rather proud of me."

Giles laughed. "Lady Carrie, you're incorrigible," he said, and behind his amusement I could sense his fondness. "But I think we've bothered you long enough."

"Hal, come and make your bow," I said to my son and watched as he approached the couch.

"You may come again," he was told, rather in the manner of a potentate. "There is a box of jujubes on the table. They're for you." As he accepted his present, the old lady looked at me. "And you, Louise," she said, "I've a fancy that we'd find many things to talk about."

She's an old woman and forgets things," Sir Giles said, as we went downstairs, Hal scampering ahead.

"Indeed? I thought she seemed remarkably sharp for her age."

"In most cases I would agree with you, but I'd be grateful if you would not make too much of these so-called letters of Harry's."

"So-called!" I exclaimed. "They were real. I saw them myself."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, I'd like your assurance not to mention them again to her."

It would have been easy enough to give him my word, but for some reason I chose not to. "I shall promise not to bring up the matter; but if Lady Caroline wishes to discuss Harry with me, then I shall answer her questions as I think fit."

Sir Giles stood looking down at me, his expression bleak. His eyes, so like his grandmother's, appeared almost black. I was fast learning that their color changed with his mood.

"Very well, Cousin," he said, "you must do as you think best."

After a curt bow he left me. I took Hal's hand and went in search of Mrs. Heath, knowing that she would expect a visit from her grandson. However, she glanced at him with mild interest, remarked that she had not supposed him to be so big, accepted a kiss, told him not to crush her dress—and dismissed him into Betsy's care with obvious relief.

"He makes me feel quite ancient," she said, touching her cheek. "I am not used to being a grandmother." She glanced at me quickly before taking a sheet of paper from her desk. She held it out. "I have been making a list of guests for your introductory dinner party. Perhaps you'd care to read it and add any of your own acquaintances you would like to invite?"

"I know no one in the district," I told her, "but thank you for the kind thought." The thought, I knew only too well, had been very far from kind.

She flushed a little and looked away. "The Allports are an old county family. Their daughter Amelia is a delightful girl. You might have something in common with General Fulton, and I believe that Sir George Brook was a military man. And then there will be the Penderels—they have a lineage going back to King Arthur, you know—and the Vicar, of course."

"It sounds delightful," I said, faintly shivering at the prospect and knowing that Mrs. Heath had brought out her most aristocratic friends and neighbors, merely to unnerve me.

During the following days the evening set aside for the dinner party seemed to approach with alarming rapidity. Then, quite suddenly, the dreaded day arrived.

I spent the morning in arranging the baskets of flowers that the gardener provided, while Mrs. Heath lay in her darkened bedroom preparing herself for her role as hostess, sending countermanding orders to her distracted cook. Sir Giles took himself off on horseback—for which I admired his good sense—not returning until time to dress for dinner.

Maggie's mother would have come in to dress our hair, but as she was in labor at that moment, Mrs. Heath and I had to be content with our regular maids' efforts. Maggie was nearly as nervous as I, but managed to arrange a creditable style, copying a fashion illustration from *The Ladies Journal.* When at last I was ready and could examine my reflection in the long mirror, I knew that I would not disgrace the Greys.

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## Chinese Love Poem

*by Otta Louise Chase*

*Take courage, now, my heart!*
*This parting is but brief—*
*the blooming of a single rose,*
*the falling of a leaf.*

Sir Giles and his mother were already awaiting their guests in the hall as I came down the stairs; they both turned to look up as I approached. Mrs. Heath's eyes were cool and calculating as they examined me from head to toe, searching for any imperfection. I lifted my chin a little and met her glance challengingly, knowing that my clothes were costly, fashionable and in the best of taste.

"My compliments," said Sir Giles, who came to the foot of the stairs, one hand held out towards me. As I slid my fingers into his he smiled and drew me down the remaining steps. "Why have you never graced our house before, Cousin?" he wondered.

"I was never asked," I whispered wickedly, and felt him squeeze my fingers in admonishment as he led me to join his mother.

Almost at once the carriage holding the first guests drew up outside, and soon I was too busy to be nervous, greeting the people introduced to me.

I went into dinner on General Fulton's arm and found the Vicar seated beside me, looking resplendent in black evening clothes with diamond studs twinkling from his shirt front.

All went very well until the dessert was brought in. The doors had just been opened to reveal Robert, bearing an enormous trifle upon a large tray, when with a dexterity I could only admire, a small figure in a long nightgown shot between two surprised maids, dodged the butler, skirted the footman—who was heavily impeded by his burden—and, wriggling between the General's chair, flung himself upon me.

"I want my Mama!" he told the world at the top of his voice, clinging to my neck with hot little hands.

"Now, Hal," I said soothingly. His fingers only tightened and I recognized the signs of one of his nightmares. Hal was a nervous child and subject to bad dreams that caused him to awake in hysterical fright. When this happened there was nothing to do but calm him as best I could and stay with him until he fell asleep again.

"I am so sorry—pray excuse me—"I began, but was interrupted by Mrs. Heath speaking from the head of the table.

"Let one of the maids take him, Louise."

Resolutely I stood up and faced her along the length of the table. "I am afraid that I must make my excuses," I said firmly, "for he will settle for no one else." Holding my son against me I hurried from the room.

After he was back in bed and asleep it took all my resolve to return to the dinner guests. But I knew that it was an ordeal that I must face and joined the ladies in the sitting room, where they had retired while the gentlemen enjoyed their port and cigars.

"Dear Louise," cooed Mrs. Heath, with an overly sweet smile. "Such a devoted Mama, even when little Hal is being naughty."

"I am afraid that his nightmares are very real to him," I said, and looked around. "To awake in a strange house can be very frightening to a sensitive disposition. Don't you agree, ladies?" And my mother-in-law could only agree with her friends—or admit that she alone in that room lacked a delicate disposition.

Soon the gentlemen joined us and Miss Amelia Allport was persuaded to perform upon the pianoforte, while Mrs. Heath presided over the tea tray. Finding myself beside Lady Brook, I was searching my mind for a topic of conversation that might interest her, when she raised her lorgnette and surveyed me through the circle of the glass.

"Do I know your people, Mrs. Grey?" she demanded forthrightly.

"I have no idea," I told her honestly. "We were Dorset people. I don't believe that my parents ever were in this part of the country. Indeed, I spent most of my childhood abroad."

"Touring, you mean?" my companion asked, and I became aware that Mrs. Heath was following our conversation with uneasy interest.

"Not exactly," I answered. "My father did military service in many parts of the world."

"Dear Lady Brook," my mother-in-law broke in. "Let me give you another cup of tea."

"Not just now, Beatrice—I'm talking to this gal of your Harry's," and turning back to me she asked the question Mrs. Heath had obviously been dreading.

"Louise"—she began in a fading voice, as I took a breath.

"My father was a medical man in the army," I said quickly, and realized, as my announcement carried over the hum of conversation, that my voice had been too loud. All the guests turned to look at me, and I felt a flush of mortification color my cheeks. Suddenly a voice broke the silence.

"Army doctor, was he, by jove," said General Fulton. "Then let me shake your hand, Mrs. Grey, your father was the salt of the earth."

Suddenly my hand was enveloped in his and I looked up into kindly eyes, half-hidden behind beetling brows.

The moment was saved and the room again filled with noise. Mrs. Heath whisked Lady Brook away before I could make any more disastrous confessions, and after a while made my escape through the open French doors to cool my hot cheeks in the garden.

The curtain behind me moved again as Sir Giles joined me on the terrace. "You disconcerted Beatie," he observed dryly.

"I am not ashamed of my father," I said hotly.

"I can see no reason why you should be. Mother has a great liking for blue blood. Her greatest wish has been to own a title, which has somehow eluded her grasp. Therefore, she wants all her relations to be of rank."

"And you, Sir Giles?"

"I, Cousin?"He turned and looked at me. "I would like to think that I judge a man—or woman—by his own worth."

For a moment longer he looked down at me, his expression sober and his eyes black in the moonlight. "We had best go in—but one thing first. That boy of yours needs a governess. He's growing wild."

"If you mean the incident at dinner—"

He shrugged. "Every child has bad dreams. No, I mean several unprovoked attacks upon the gardeners, a good many raids upon the kitchen gardens, several complaints from Hobson and a broken window in the library."

"Good heavens, has he been so bad?"

"I am afraid that his new found freedom has gone to his head, and so I think a governess is advisable."

"I will teach him myself—and keep him closer."

"It will not do, my dear," my companion declared, an implacable note in his voice.

"He is a nervous child and would be happier with me, Sir Giles."

"I should point out that very often an outsider can see more clearly—and in this case I believe your relationship to be a little too close."

"Too close!" I exclaimed. "What can you mean?"

"Nothing dramatic, Cousin; merely that I feel you would both benefit by a little less of each other's company."

I grew very still. "You don't propose to send Hal away to school?"

Sir Giles shook his head. "Nothing of the kind. First a governess and then a tutor."

"I still feel—" I began stubbornly.

"My dear Louise," broke in Sir Giles, "I fear I must remind you that you agreed to my taking care of Hal's education."

◆

*Love, while you are able to love.*

Freiligrath
Der Liebe Dauer

I opened my mouth to say more, but one glance at the steely expression above me told me there was no point in continuing the argument. For the moment I turned away from a confrontation with my husband's brother and gave the impression of acquiescence, while a thought occurred to me. With luck, I might be able to turn the situation to my advantage.

"May I have a word with you, sir?" By good fortune I had met Sir Giles in the corridor and decided to confront him before I lost my resolution.

For a moment he stood looking down at me, a slight frown between his black brows, before he gave a curt nod and led the way to his study. "Sit down, Cousin Louise," he said perching himself on the edge of a substantial desk, with the air of a man impatient to have the business finished. "But be warned that I have no intention of altering my mind with regard to the hiring of a governess."

"No, I quite understand that," I answered, with a meekness I was far from feeling. "It occurred to me that I might know the very woman. She called on me just before we left London on her way home to Dover, and I believe that she was seeking a new position."

"Indeed?"

Sir Giles seemed indifferent and I hurried on. "Emily Frazer has a son of about Hal's age—if she could bring him, he would be a perfect companion for Hal."

"Are you suggesting, Marm," he asked, "that I turn my house into a boys' school?"

"No, of course not. I can hardly see how two small boys can constitute a school," I answered impatiently, forgetting the role I had assigned to myself, "and I *wish* you would stop calling me 'Marm' in that horrid way."

"That's better," Sir Giles said surprisingly. "I like you better when you flash your temper at me, than when you act the part of a mollycoddler. Such mildness fills me with disquiet."

Biting my lip, I glanced up, my chagrin melting beneath the amusement in his eyes. I felt myself smile in return, but Sir Giles stood up abruptly and went to stare out of the window.

Thrusting his hands deep into the large pockets of the tweed shooting jacket he wore, he spoke without turning round. "I understand that you think a companion is desirable for Hal. I gather you have this Mrs. Frazer's address. If you will let me have it I shall ask my man in London to write to her, and if her credentials are suitable I shall engage the lady."

The business went forward with surprising speed and in less than a month I was able to tell Hal that a boy his own age would be coming to share his lessons with *him*. He greeted the news with surprising calm, merely inquiring his companion's name.

"Henry, the same as yours—but I believe his Mama calls him Harry."

"Well, I might let him have a go on my rocking horse, but Dobbin will still be mine," he announced aggressively. For the first time I wondered if I had done the right thing in providing Hal with a companion.

At last the day of their arrival dawned, and I noticed that while Hal disclaimed all interest, he hung around the windows eager to be the first to announce that Mrs. Frazer and Harry had come. About mid-afternoon we heard the sound of wheels on the drive, and following Hal to the nursery window I could observe the niceties of social distinction displayed.

The new governess and her son apparently merited no more, as means of transport, than a somewhat dilapidated dog cart, an obvious leftover from Sir Giles's childhood. They were, however, set down at the main entrance to Grey Towers and allowed to use the same door as the family. A few minutes later we heard footsteps in the corridor and Mrs. Frazer was announced.

"I am so pleased you could come," I said, going forward with hand outstretched to meet her.

"I am grateful you remembered me," she replied gravely, and brought her son forward with one hand. "Harry, make your bow to Mrs. Grey." She met my eyes inquiringly and I realized her predicament.

"Hal," I supplied quickly, and we both watched as the boys took wary stock of each other. "They could almost be brothers," I remarked, struck by the similarity in their height and size. "How old is Harry?"

"He is seven."

"Just a little older than Hal then, who will be six soon. Is it not strange that they should both have the same name?"

"I believe that Henry is not uncommon. Harry was named after his father."

"As was my Hal." For a moment I sat looking at her calm countenance before saying: "Mrs. Frazer, forgive me for asking, but I take it that you too are a widow?"

She turned to look at me, an unfathomable expression in her blue eyes. "I lost my husband the year before the Crimean War broke out," she said quietly.

"I am so sorry. I *do* understand." Impulsively, I covered her hand with mine. She made no response to my sympathetic overture, letting her fingers lie passively under mine. On the surface Mrs. Frazer seemed the conventional governess, with her genteel manners and unobtrusive gray gown, but I caught a glimpse of what lay beneath, and it occurred to me that her true character was very far from the one she presented to the world.

Over the next few days I was not to reverse my opinion. The new governess met the family and quite won over my mother-in-law, who treated her with condescending kindness. Lady Caroline appeared bored with her mild manners and soon tired of her correct conversation; while Sir Giles watched her with sleepy eyes and said little. Something in his gaze made me view her with new eyes. I realized that her particular brand of pale blonde prettiness could be very attractive to the opposite sex.

After a period of initial wariness Hal and Harry settled down together, and soon became inseparable, their high spirits leading them into many acts which were not always appreciated by the adult members of Grey Towers. For their own safety—and my peace of mind—I constantly inquired as to their whereabouts. Maggie and Betsy proved to be able assistants in the matter; and so I was not surprised when one afternoon Maggie appeared to announce that it was "them boys again."

"What now?" I asked wearily.

"Well, miss, they're on the lake," she began. "They've got out one of the old boats and what looks like a nursery tablecloth for a sail. I can see them from the bedroom window."

The day was perfectly still and hot. Longing for coolness myself I had only to glance out at the shimmering garden to understand their feelings.

"Do you know where Mrs. Frazer is?" I asked, rising reluctantly to my feet. "See if you can find her while I fetch in the boys."

Maggie hesitated. "I'm not just telling tales—the lake is deep. One of the gardener's boys was drowned last year when he went for a swim."

Catching my breath, I stared at her for a second. "I had no idea!" Whirling on my heels, I dashed out of the house.

◆

*Where love is, there's no lack.*

Richard Brome
A Jovial Crew

Across the lawn the lake glittered in the sun and, shading my eyes against the glare, I could make out two small figures. Even as I hurried towards them, one of the boys stood up, apparently to adjust the limp tablecloth sail, overbalanced, and with a wail and wildly flailing arms, fell into the water.

"Get help!" I cried urgently to Maggie, who had followed me, and picking up my skirts ran across the dry grass. "Stay still." I shouted to the boy in the boat, and at that distance could not be sure if it was Hal or Harry.

Reaching under my skirt I untied the strings of my crinoline, and stepping out of the whalebone hoops I let it fall to the ground. Wearing only a thin summer muslin, I plunged into the water.

The boy in the lake was Harry. He was in no danger of drowning, as Hal held his hair tightly despite the owner's struggles and cries. A moment later I realized that Harry could swim almost as well as I and, keeping pace beside him, I towed the boat to the shore and the crowd of would-be rescuers who awaited us. Splashing past me, Fuller the gardener plunged into the water and pulled the boat up onto the land.

"Young varmints!" he muttered, and I could see that his brown hairy hands itched to box their ears. "Begging your pardon, ma'am," he added.

"Not at all," I said with feeling. "I only wish I knew a worse word!"

"Oh, miss, you were ever so brave!" cried Maggie suddenly.

"I was in no danger," I told her. "I learned to swim in India. Now run ahead and lay out some dry clothes for me while I see if I can get indoors unobserved."

The back stairs seemed the best chance, and I thought I had accomplished my task when a door opened and Sir Giles emerged. For a moment he gazed at me in astonishment, before he remarked wryly that the weather *was* a trifle warm.

I gritted my teeth. "Those wretched boys were playing with a boat and—"

Sir Giles's lips twitched. "And one fell in and you went to the rescue. I take it that you can swim. How provident! It's not a usual accomplishment."

"I learned as a child," I explained briefly. Following his gaze as his eyes traveled over me, I suddenly realized how revealing my wet clothes were as they clung to me and two warm spots flew to my cheeks.

"I find you full of surprises," Sir Giles said softly. I was only too aware of the double meaning that lay behind his words.

"I must go and change," I said stiffly

and walked quickly past him.

"Pray find Mrs. Frazer and ask her to come here," I said to the hovering maid, after I had changed and was arranging my damp hair in a chignon net.

One glance at the governess's face when she arrived told me she knew the reason behind my request.

"The boys were very nearly drowned this afternoon," I said calmly, watching her in the mirror as I twisted the last strands of hair into place. "Where were you, Mrs. Frazer?"

"I am most terribly sorry, Mrs. Grey. I know I should have been with them, but I had a headache and . . . I am afraid I fell asleep."

She was certainly pale, but showed no other signs of either a headache or being woken abruptly. "If you were unwell, you should have put the children in Betsy's care," I told her.

She dropped her gaze. "I know. But I thought they would be all right. I never dreamed that they'd go to the lake."

"Then I am afraid you don't know little boys very well," I reproved her.

"Harry can swim very well—"

"But not Hal."

"I am sure Harry would have rescued him given time."

"*Harry* was the one in the water. When I arrived Hal had him by the hair and was doing his best to pull him back into the boat."

She looked stunned. *"Harry?"* she whispered, then recovered quickly and went on hastily. "Then I can only thank you for your intervention and assure you it will not happen again."

"To that end I intend to accompany you to the nursery and give those children such a scolding that they will never so much as go near a puddle again." But when we entered the schoolroom Sir Giles was already there.

Looking up from the two chastened faces at his knee, he stood when he saw us and allowed his expression to relax a little.

"Make your apologies to your mothers," he told the children, and remarked that he thought they had been punished enough by the fright they had had.

"Oh surely not," put in Mrs. Frazer. "Harry, for one, shall have no supper tonight." She flushed a little under his quizzical gaze and added quickly, "You must not think me unduly stern or hard, but the fright they gave *me*—and Mrs. Grey of course—was terribly hard to bear. Such wildness must not go unchecked." Her voice trembled a little as she put a hand to her head. "I blame myself, but truly I had such pain in my head. . . . I can only promise that it shall not occur again."

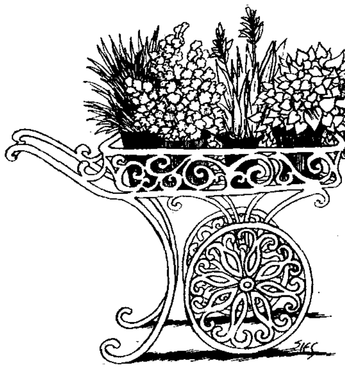
The pathetic smile Mrs. Frazer produced had an interesting effect upon Sir Giles. Taking her arm, he led her to a chair and, sitting her in it, inquired solicitously after her welfare.

"I shall be quite all right," she said bravely. "No doubt I shall be able to take the boys for a walk in a little while."

"You are not to think of it," my husband's brother said firmly. "Mrs. Grey and I will undertake that duty. We'll collect them after tea."

As I looked up in surprise, he bowed to both of us and left the room before I could protest.

What made me put on my new straw hat that perched on my head, wide and flat and tied under my chin by soft pink ribbons, I had no idea. But one glance at Sir Giles as he waited on the terrace told me I had made a wise choice.



"Vastly becoming," he murmured appreciatively as we walked towards the shrubbery, the boys following obediently, "but it makes it deucedly difficult to talk to you."

"Had I known you wished to converse," I said demurely, "I should have taken care to wear a bonnet that made me less of a mushroom."

He smiled down at me. "Never liken yourself to anything so unromantic, my dear Lucy," he began, but when I caught my breath at the mention of my name he paused, puzzled.

"Lucy," I repeated. "No one has called me Lucy since my husband—since Harry died."

"And would you rather I did not?"

I slowly shook my head. "I—I find that I like it," I said a little breathlessly.

"Then Lucy it shall be," said my companion, and would have said more; but feeling that this conversation had gone far enough, I stopped him with a quick gesture and asked why he wished to see me.

At once Sir Giles drew back, and when he spoke his voice that had held warmth was polite and distant. "I merely thought, Cousin, that Hal was old enough to start riding lessons and wished for your approval."

"You don't usually require such a thing," I said bluntly. "It surprises me that you have not made arrangements without mentioning it to me." Glancing up I saw his mouth twitch and guessed shrewdly. "Why, I do believe you have! I daresay the pony is already in the stable!"

"I must confess that he arrives tomorrow," he acknowledged a little lamely, as I walked silently beside him. "You do not approve?"

"I am not keen," I admitted. "In India once, my father attended a child after a riding accident."

"You must have ridden in India," he went on, and again I nodded, unwilling to admit that my experience of horses had been very limited. "Then you must have a mount too, and when Hal is proficient, we can ride together." He took my silence for assent, and we walked on.

Just why I allowed Sir Giles to believe I was a better rider than in truth I was, I do not completely know. My pride would not let me correct his assumption and admit that the only horses I had ridden were tired Army hacks without a trace of spirit in them, used to carrying burdens over long distances.

During the next few days I began to hope that nothing would come of Sir Giles's proposal.

But one morning I was presented with a message from Sir Giles, asking me to join him in the stables. With a sinking heart I obeyed.

I found Sir Giles and his groom admiring a shiny black mare that was being walked round the yard, while a group of stable boys watched respectfully from a distant corner.

"Ah, Cousin," said Sir Giles, turning at my approach. "You see I have procured you a mount. How do you like Bess?" Before I could reply he had turned away calling for Rollo to be brought out. I almost cried out in delight as a little pony scarcely higher than my shoulder was paraded before me. "He looks like nothing so much as a rocking horse," I said. "I'm sure Hal will love him. Thank you for finding the horses," I said a little awkwardly.

"I'll look forward to riding with you tomorrow," Sir Giles said, then observed, "You seem extremely hesitant, Cousin —do you wish to change your mind?"

"No," I found myself answering vehemently. "I shall look forward to it." I knew even then it was not too late to swallow my pride and tell him the truth. But a faintly amused cynicism in his eyes told me he half-expected such an excuse; the knowledge that he doubted my courage made me determined to prove him wrong. "I believe you ride before breakfast," I said, lifting my chin to meet his pale eyes. "I shall not keep you waiting."

When I stole out of my room early the next morning the main part of the house was still, all its occupants deep in sleep. Only the sounds of the servants stirring came clearly from the kitchen as they prepared for the day ahead.

In the stables Sir Giles was deep in conversation with a groom, but turned at my approach to look me over quickly. "Well met, Cousin," he said crossing the yard to join me, as the black mare was led out, her hooves clattering on the cobbles. Bending a knee he cupped his hands to receive my foot and tossed me up into the sidesaddle.

Settling my skirts and tucking my leg under me, I was pleased to find I had not forgotten the feel of a saddle. Gathering up the reins, I followed Sir Giles as he led the way from the stableyard, relieved to find that the movement of a thoroughbred horse was not so different from the sturdy hacks I had ridden in India. Settling into a steady jog we rode along the tree-lined drive, the early rays of the sun shining between their trunks and making the little brass buttons on my bodice twinkle.

Soon my husband's brother turned off the drive, heading towards some rolling parkland. With a glance behind at me, Sir Giles suddenly let out his horse and I followed him willy-nilly as Bess accepted the challenge to race.

Tightening the grip of my knee and holding onto the reins, I followed the flying tail of Sir Giles's mount and prayed that I would not disgrace myself by falling off. Quite soon we reached some trees and Sir Giles drew in his horse and waited for me. The mare cavorted, evidently sensing my mood, her ears pricking nervously, and when a pheasant started noisily out of the undergrowth almost at her feet, that was all she needed to break into a headlong flight.

Bending my head under low branches, I discarded the reins and clutched her round the neck, my fingers desperate with the instinct for self-preservation. Just when I felt the mare's panic-stricken speed begin to slacken, she put her hoof into a hole in the ground. I barely had time to kick my foot free of the stirrup as I was tossed from the saddle.

An agonizing pain shot up my left wrist as I landed heavily on the ground. For a moment I lay half-stunned; then Sir Giles's hands seized me.

"Lucy, I could wring your neck!" said Sir Giles ungallantly. "Why didn't you tell me you couldn't ride?"

"I can ride," I protested, surprised at how weak my voice sounded.

"Your seat is abominable, and let me tell you that I've never been an advocate for the method of losing the reins and holding to the horse's neck."

Slowly I opened my eyes and saw him watching me with more concern than his words would have warranted. "You'll do," he said briefly.

"No bones broken, but I believe your wrist is sprained." With gentle fingers he explored my wrist, then undid three of the little brass buttons at my waist and slipped my hand inside my bodice. "If you feel well enough to sit up, we'll see about getting you home before that fool mare arrives in the stable with an empty saddle and causes panic."

He slid his arms under me and carried me to his horse, then swung into the saddle behind me. I relaxed as his arm encircled my waist, holding me firmly against his chest. Hiding my face against Sir Giles's shoulder, I felt his grip tighten a little and thought I heard him curse beneath his breath.

Suddenly cobbles clattered beneath horse's hooves and we were surrounded by anxious voices, asking questions and offering advice. Ignoring them all, Sir Giles barked a few brisk orders as he slid from the saddle, and carried me into the house.

"I feel faint," I told him as he mounted the stairs.

"I daresay," he answered, and surrendered me into the care of Mrs. Medley and Maggie, who were waiting at the door of my room.

For a while I played the role of an invalid, but after a few days I came downstairs, with a darkening bruise on my forehead and black silk ribbon supporting my wrist. I sat out upon the terrace, pleased to feel the sun upon my face after the confining days spent in my room.

"I am glad to see you are looking better, Cousin." Sir Giles had interrupted my thoughts.

"Yes, a bruise is very becoming, is it not?" I answered brightly. "And the black ribbon is bound to catch on as a fashionable accessory. Indeed, I cannot think why it has not been taken up before. It goes so well with summer muslins."

"I see being an invalid does not improve your temper," he remarked.

"I look horrid and am very well aware of it," I told him crossly, and looked up as a shadow fell across my lap and his hand tilted my chin.

"A little tired and pale, perhaps— but the bruise will soon fade."

Irrational tears sprung to my eyes at the kindness in his voice and I turned away my head so that he would not see them. "I am sorry. . . " I murmured and put out my hand blindly.

At once it was taken in a warm grasp, as Sir Giles closed both hands around mine. "Poor Lucy," he said softly and stroked the back of my hand with his thumb, which I found strangely disconcerting. He must have noticed my discomfort for he stood up abruptly, and walked a few paces to stand with his hands in his pockets and his back to me.

"I had a letter from my sister Isobel this morning," he said. "Apparently she's tired of the Continent and is coming here before the season starts. You'll enjoy her company, I'm sure. She's a very gay person."

"Will her husband come, too?"

"George Amery? I believe so—for a few days. We must try to arrange a few social affairs," he went on carelessly. "We live much too quiet a life here. Beatie will be in her element; she likes nothing so much as entertaining."

"I hope the boys mend their ways—or at least put on their best manners. Mrs. Heath won't take kindly to any annoyances from them. I must say they've been very quiet lately."

"Yes—well . . . I promised that they could try their hands at pony riding as soon as you were well, if they were good."

The dismay I tried to hide showed on my face.

"Surely you didn't expect—my dear Louise, you must realize that all boys have to ride. How else would they get around?"

"I know, but—"

"I am sure that you are too intelligent to let your own accident sway your judgment," he went on smoothly.

*Love is love's reward.*
John Dryden Palamon and Arcite

"Hal is a little nervous."

"Then the sooner he is put up on a horse's back and realizes that his fears are ill-founded the better." He paused for a moment, looking at me reflectively. "Would you feel happier if you were there at his first attempt? I intend to give them both their first lesson tomorrow after breakfast. Why not join us in the yard?"

I spent a restless night and after breakfast followed the sounds of excitement to the stableyard. Harry was cavorting about in high spirits, but to my anxious eyes Hal appeared quiet and rather pale.

Mrs. Frazer was there, a prim figure in a gray dress with a narrow white collar and neat lace cuffs. I noticed with interest that she was playing with a white handkerchief with nervous fingers and was obviously not so composed as she wished to appear.

Soon after, Sir Giles took the reins of the little pony to lead him up to the two boys, making them smooth his head and feed him oats from their cupped hands.

"You first, Hal," he said after a while, when he felt they had made friends. One of the grooms came forward and lifted my son onto Rollo's back. Even at that distance I could see that Hal tensed and his fingers clutched at the groom's jacket.

"Take the reins," commanded Sir Giles. "You are quite safe." As Hal reluctantly obeyed him, Sir Giles led the pony forward a few steps.

Instinctively Hal's fingers left the reins and curled tightly in Rollo's mane. At that very moment Mrs. Frazer's handkerchief blew out of her hand along the ground towards the pony's feet. Rollo stamped his hooves skittishly and tossed his head, while with a wild yell of fear Hal slithered from the saddle and hurtled across the cobbles to fling himself upon me, hiding his head in my skirt.

Sir Giles handed the reins to the groom and strode towards us, kneeling beside Hal and touching his shoulder.

"Come on, old fellow," he said persuasively, "let's have another go."

Hal shook his head, refusing to lift his face from the folds of my skirt. I put my hand reassuringly on his fair hair. "No," he whimpered. "No. Horses kill people—I don't like him . . . I don't like riding."

"We all have to do things we don't like," Giles persuaded him. "Show us how brave you are."

"I—I'm not. I'm only little—and he's big—and I won't."

"Try again, sweetheart," I said. "Just one little try and then we'll go in."

The blonde head shook against my knee and I sighed helplessly.

"Perhaps if he sees the other little lad up," suggested one of the grooms, and at Sir Giles's nod Harry was lifted onto Rollo's broad back.

Grinning with delight, he took to the saddle as if born to it and was soon being led around the yard. His mother looked on with pleasure, and I seethed with chagrin. Glancing sideways from my skirt, Hal watched his friend and at last consented to being put back in the saddle.

"That was your fault," accused Sir Giles as we watched, and I looked up startled to meet his angry eyes. "You may have given the child a nervousness that will last him all his life. Good God, woman, have you no better sense than to fill your son with your own ill-founded fears?"

"But I didn't!" I cried indignantly. "I haven't said a word to him."

"Then may I ask who else would have filled his ears with tales until he's afraid of the sight of horses?"

"If Mrs. Frazer hadn't dropped her handkerchief—"

"That had very little to do with it. The boy was scared before he even mounted the horse and you well know it." He glowered at me for a second longer before turning on his heel, only to swing back again. "And let me tell you, cousin Louise, that you are not to attempt to ride again yourself, until I have given you a few lessons. You are as much in need of them as your son."

"I will do exactly as I please," I was exasperated enough to tell him.

His dark eyes narrowed. "Then you are even more foolish than I thought."

"And you are quite as overbearing and rude as *I* thought," I retorted. "I cannot imagine why you think you can tell me what to do. I am a free born Englishwoman, Sir Giles, and I don't even have a husband to make me account for my actions."

"By God, I wish I was—" then realizing the impropriety of what he was about to say, he caught himself up sharp. The group of people in the yard were watching us with interest, and although we had tried to keep our voices low, it must have been obvious that our conversation was far from amicable. "I have been toying with a proposal for some days and your son's action has caused me to make up my mind. I intend to arrange for a tutor. Obviously, Hal is in need of a man's hand."

◆

*Love teaches letters to a man unlearn'd.*
Euripides Stheneboea

Isobel Amery was all I wished to be and was not: tall and graceful, fashionably dressed with an undeniable air of elegance, her ash-blond hair caught back beneath a hat tilted to an impossible angle over her forehead.

Sweeping me up in a perfumed embrace, she dropped a kiss on my cheek and then stood back to study me. "Lucy," she smiled. "I would have known you anywhere."

Seeing my bewilderment she sank down on a settee, patting the place beside her in an inviting gesture. "From Harry's letters—he told me all about you. And I may call you Lucy, may I not, for that is how he always wrote of you to me."

Sitting beside her I watched in some amusement as she arranged those about her to do her bidding. Mrs. Heath was only too happy to order a tray of tea, Sir George was sent to find the box of presents they had brought and even Sir Giles allowed himself to be sent into the garden to find the particular rose without which, Lady Amery declared, she could never feel quite at home.

"Dearest Lucy," she cried, setting down her cup, "come upstairs with me while I change out of these traveling clothes. I am sure we have a great deal to talk about."

And as the days went by I found that although different in temperament and background, Isobel Amery and I discovered a mutual liking that quickly developed into friendship. With her gaiety and vivaciousness she reminded me of my husband; even her pale hair was much the same color as his had been. At times it was very hard to believe that she and Sir Giles were brother and sister.

"Tell me," she said one day, "what do you think of my big brother?" She laughed as I searched for some noncommittal reply and told me to speak the truth.

"Well," I began cautiously, "I am afraid we do not always get on."

She seemed faintly surprised. "Indeed? I had thought—forgive me, but I had imagined that he felt kindly towards you."

It was my turn for surprise. "Oh no, you are mistaken. At times I feel that he positively dislikes me."

Lady Amery was amused and raised her eyebrows at my obvious confusion. However, she let the matter drop and to my relief turned the conversation to lighter subjects. With her presence came an increase in the social life of Grey

Towers; the cards upon the mantelpiece proclaimed to all how desirable was her company. I found myself included in these events, and little Maggie Brown coped admirably with the demands put upon her, pressing my gowns and dressing my hair with all the skill of someone much older.

However, one evening as I dressed for dinner, I noticed she was quieter than usual, her face abstracted and worried; at last I asked if something was bothering her.

"It's my mother, ma'am," she answered. "She's been in labor for some time and the babe still hasn't come."

"Has the doctor seen her?"

She smiled wanly at my ignorance. "The likes of us don't have a doctor," she explained. "Old Goody Green from the village has to suffice. She usually manages all right, but this time nothing she can do seems to work."

"Then you must ask Doctor Black to call."

Maggie shook her head. "With six at home and another on the way, we can't afford him. And my father's too proud to ask him to come knowing he won't be able to pay his bill."

For a moment I looked at her through the mirror as she combed my hair. "Then I shall pay," I said firmly, but she only shook her head again. "Why ever not? Surely your father would accept my help."

"It's not that, ma'am. I know he'd be grateful, but Mrs. Heath wouldn't allow it without her permission."

"Then I shall go and explain matters to her," I said and without further delay went to my mother-in-law's room.

"But, my dear Louise," she said when I had made known my errand, "she's a servant. Such women are quite different from ladies who might have difficulties at such a time. Next time you see little Margaret Brown you'll find that her mother has produced another child and is already back at work."

"But how do you know? Maggie is very worried. Her mother has been in labor for so long a time."

Mrs. Heath winced at my concern and dabbed perfume on her wrists before replying, "Mrs. Brown will have her baby without any other aid than the help of some village woman."

"I came to ask you to require Doctor Black to call on her," I persisted.

"My dear Louise." She leaned forward to examine her reflection. "I really don't think it necessary. You shall find it much better to let the servants manage their own affairs."

For a moment I looked at her, the smell of her heavy scent drifting to me. "Do you mean that you will not send for the doctor?" I asked incredulously.

Mrs. Heath tucked away a stray curl. "I really feel there is no need; the lower classes exaggerate so. You have had little experience with servants, but I know how little it takes for them to become hysterical. They have no self-control."

Mrs. Heath's eyes fell beneath my gaze as she busied herself clasping two heavy gold bracelets about her wrists. "I find this matter rather distasteful," she said coldly. "I feel it's a subject that no lady would interest herself with."

"If it is a subject that doesn't interest a lady, I quite fail to see how the aristocracy fills its cradles," I retorted angrily. "And if you won't send a message to the doctor, then I will." Picking up my skirts, I ran from the room to hastily scribble a note to the local physician.

I could have managed it better," said Isobel Amery candidly, when I told her the story. "More's the pity that I was away at the time."

We were on our way upstairs to pay a visit to Lady Caroline and Isobel at once proceeded to enlighten the old lady with the tale.

"Tut-tut," she said, shaking her head at me. "You should know by now that Beatrice believes anyone below stairs has no feelings. Next time come to me. I may be old and infirm, but I can still rouse myself if the need arises."

"I'll remember in future," I promised.

"Did she bear a live child—or are they both in the grave?"

"No, it ended quite happily. Maggie has a new brother and there is every hope that her mother will recover."

Lady Carrie looked thoughtful. "I remember engaging her as a timid little girl of twelve—and now her daughter is your maid, Louise." She sighed. "How the years go by. It seems a minute ago that I was a girl myself. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and am surprised to find myself a prisoner in this old, withered body."

"But what a life you've lived, Grandmama," put in Lady Amery quickly. "Did you know, Louise, that she met all those disreputable, notorious people one hears the scandal whispered about?"

"No," I said, opening my eyes wide. "I've never truly believed they were real."

"Real!" snorted Lady Carrie, enraged. "Why I knew George Byron and even saw Caroline Melbourne when she called on him dressed as a boy."

◆

*Love can vanquish Death.*
Alfred Lord Tennyson
A Dream of a Fair Woman

Successfully diverted, and enjoying herself hugely, the old lady set out to shock us, while I remembered our original conversation and determined to pay a visit to Mrs. Brown and her new infant as soon as possible.

The opportunity arose a few days later. Mrs. Heath was paying an afternoon call, having pointedly neglected to invite me to accompany her. Taking the boys for company, I filled a basket with a few gifts for the baby and set off across the grounds to the lodge that I knew they occupied.

Leaving the boys outside with some of the Brown children, I accompanied the eldest girl inside. Though small and cramped, the interior was clean and tidy, consisting of one room that served as both kitchen and living room, leading off to two smaller bedrooms. I found Mrs. Brown in bed with her babe beside her, and was pleased to see her looking better than I had expected.

"Maggie told me how you sent for the doctor," she said quietly, "and we all thank you for it, ma'am."

"I'm glad I could help," I told her, and fell to admiring the new arrival.

Glancing at the bundle in the crook of her elbow, she smiled slightly. "Yes, he's a fine child," she agreed, "but the doctor tells me he's the last I'll have."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I cried involuntarily.

"I'm not, ma'am," she said bluntly, meeting my eyes with candor. "I've enough to manage and provide for. It'll be a relief to think there's an end to it. It's not easy looking after a family in a house this size."

Noticing the curtain that divided half the room to give privacy to the parents sharing the tiny space with their younger children, I nodded understandingly.

"Can't another house be found for you?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"It's the money, you see—with only Maggie out to work, we need every penny."

"I'll see what I can do," I offered.

"You've done enough, ma'am," she smiled, and touched the packages I had brought. "I know you've been kind to our Maggie and that means a lot to me."

"She's a very good girl."

"I taught her all I know, ma'am, and I was maid to Lady Carrie before I was married."

"She mentioned you a few days ago."

"And remembered me, ma'am. She sent a box for me and the babe yesterday. She always was a good, kind mistress."

Soon after I took my leave, promising that Maggie should have the next day off and be allowed to spend it with her family.

The next day, however, when meeting Sir Giles upon the stairs, *he* turned a menacing face upon me and demanded my presence in his study.

"Certainly," I said, with a calm I was far from feeling. "I have a few minutes to spare."

"Free or not, Cousin," he spit between his teeth, "you will accompany me." Once in his study, I crossed to the window and stood looking out at the garden, while he leaned against the closed door. When I could stand the silence no longer, I turned to smile brightly into his glowering countenance.

"I gather you have something to say to me?"

"Indeed I have." He pushed his shoulders away from the door panels and crossed the thick carpet towards me.

It was all I could do not to flee from his advance. However, I stood my ground and even managed to meet his gaze. In that moment I noticed how dark his eyes were, and knew by their color how great was his rage.

"How dare you, Louise, interfere in matters concerning the estate!"

I raised my eyebrows and said coolly. "Oh, you mean the Browns—"

"Precisely. The Browns, who, you have apparently decided, live in squalor and misery. Let me tell you, my dear Louise, that I pride myself upon the conditions of my workers—that their housing and pay are among the best in the county."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "It's your pride that's hurt," I announced.

His eyebrows drew together in a black line. "Brown assures me that he's happy and contented where he is."

"Well, he'd hardly say he wasn't, would he?" I pointed out candidly, and saw that I had given him pause for thought.

"The cottage is repaired and looked over each year—"

"It's too small," I interrupted boldly, and seizing my advantage went on quickly. "Do you know how many children your groom has?"

"Three or four I suppose."

"The new babe makes seven," I told him. "Do you know how many rooms there are in the lodge? Three. I don't suppose you have even given thought to wonder how they all contrive to pack themselves into such a little space."

The silence grew, but when at last I felt him relax beside me I knew I had won. I looked up quickly to find him regarding me with an unfathomable expression.

"Well, Louise," he said slowly, "what would you have me do?"

"You must either give your groom another shilling a week or build a new room onto the lodge."

Sir Giles smiled grimly. "I see you have given the matter much thought," he said quietly.

Now that the battle was over, I sank gratefully into a chair.

"I frighten you, Lucy," he said perceptively. "And yet you face me."

"My father told me never to retreat in the face of an enemy."

"Surely you don't regard me as an enemy?"

I shook my head. "Only when you glare at me and regard me from under your brows—so—"and made a face.

He laughed and perched himself on the edge of his desk. "We'll call a truce," he offered, and I readily accepted. "I'll see what can be arranged about the Browns."

I began to rise, but Sir Giles waved me back to my seat. "You may recall what I said some time ago, that the boys needed the discipline of a tutor?" At my mute nod, he went on. "I have arranged for a Mr. John Dunn to take up a position here within the next few days."

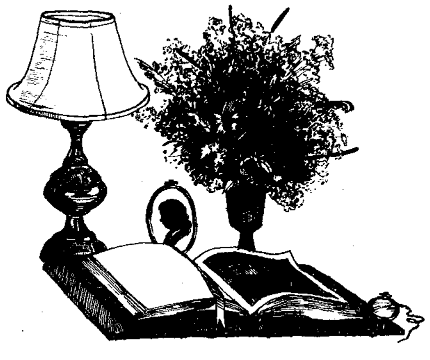
Dismayed, I stared down at my hands in my lap and twisted the gold band on my wedding finger. Suddenly his hand covered my fingers and I looked up startled to find Sir Giles bending over me.

"Louise—Lucy, pray don't be unhappy. Mr. Dunn seems a very nice young man, and I shall keep my eye on him." He smiled down into my worried face, the corners of his eyes crinkling a little. "Rest assured that I have Hal's welfare at heart."

Somewhat reassured, I allowed myself to be comforted and asked when the tutor would arrive.

"Sometime next week. I believe he has just returned from Canada. His references are excellent—he only left his last position because he wished to see his father who had been ill."

His fingers closed around mine, and he drew me to my feet. "I'm sure the boys will take to him. I must say that when I interviewed him in London, he impressed me favorably. He seemed to have all the attributes needed in a tutor."



And so I found when Mr. Dunn arrived. I was returning to my room, when a commotion in the hall made me turn; I saw a slim, neat young man standing below me, drawing off his gloves while his baggage was brought in by the footman.

Seeming to sense my interest, he looked up and, meeting my gaze, held my eyes for a moment, before bowing elegantly. With a cool nod I hurried upstairs, rounding the bend in time to see the familiar gray skirt of Mrs. Frazer vanishing into her room. As the door closed with a quiet click, I frowned and paused thoughtfully before deciding that the governess had every right to be interested in the arrival of the new tutor.

The boys, their governess and I gathered in the schoolroom the next morning to be introduced to Mr. Dunn. I smiled at Hal's and Harry's apprehensive faces and strove to make light conversation while we waited. Mrs. Frazer seemed abstracted, standing by the window and making little effort to join in our talk.

I thought she gave a slight gasp as footsteps approached, but when I glanced at her she seemed composed. As the door opened and the gentleman came in, I turned from her and gave my attention to the newcomer.

"Let me present Mr. John Dunn," Sir Giles said formally, and the tutor bowed over my hand with an elegance which I found charming.

Seeing his quiet manner win over the children, I felt more at ease than I had for days.

"I have arranged a room in the old tower to be used as the new schoolroom." He turned to Mrs. Frazer who had been standing quietly all this while. "I am sure you understand that the boys will be going to Mr. Dunn only for higher education," he said. "He will deal with Latin and Greek and a little mathematics. I have every confidence in the way you have taught them so far, and have no wish to remove them from your care."

She smiled and bowed her thanks. "You are too kind, sir. I am quite sure that whatever you have decided is for the best. Gentlemen are always so well versed in such matters. I am afraid that we females need guidance at times."

She almost glanced at me as she spoke, but not quite; her eyes flickered in my direction, and I felt myself stiffen at her innuendo.

Sir Giles agreed. "True, true," he

agreed, and I knew from his voice that he was suppressing amusement. "Pray feel free to ask my advice at any time."

Abruptly I put an end to a conversation which I found extremely irritating.

"Don't let us disturb you any longer, Mrs. Frazer," I said a little maliciously. "I am sure we have kept the children from their lessons too long for your liking as it is."

Sir Giles held the door for me, and we had begun to walk down the corridor together when I discovered I had left my reticule in the schoolroom. Taking my leave of him, I hurried back to collect it, re-entering the room without preamble.

"My reticule—I left it here—" I began, when something in the atmosphere made me pause uncertainly.

The governess and tutor stood a little too close together, giving the impression of words hastily suppressed at my entrance. Even as I spoke, Mr. Dunn turned and smiled easily at me, picking up my bag from the table and presenting it to me gracefully. Accepting it, I turned back to the door, finding him before me as he opened it for me to pass through; and meeting his guileless gaze, wondered at my own suspicions.

The year wore on, and we put away our summer gowns, replacing light muslins with heavier silks and grosgrams. Lady Amery made plans to rejoin her husband in London for the season ahead, while Hal and Harry became accustomed to the presence of their tutor. Indeed, that young man soon became indispensible to the smooth running of Grey Towers, acting as occasional secretary to Sir Giles and factotum to Mrs. Heath. He was always willing to read to Lady Carrie, and ever ready to oblige anyone in any way required. In the general approbation I was the only one to have any reservations about Mr. Dunn, who was otherwise universally appreciated.

Indeed, when I analyzed my feelings, I found there was not one substantial reason behind my unease, unless it was the fact that Mr. Dunn was just a little too eager to please.

One day from behind the thick trunks I saw the boys approach the old tower, and make straight for the gaping black doorway, Hal in the lead. Just as he reached the entrance, a movement above made me glance up. A gasp of horror escaped me as a heavy stone seemed to detach itself from the ruin and plunge downwards.

Unable to close my eyes, I watched for what seemed a lifetime. The block of stone crashed in the turf between the children, missing them both by some miracle. Released from the spell that held me immobile, I dashed forward.

Not understanding their danger, the two boys were excited by the strangeness of the event and broke into voluble, nervous speech. Amid their cries of protest, I drew them away. "We really must go back to the house and warn everyone that the tower is dangerous."

"Dangerous?" repeated Sir Giles incredulously when I burst impetuously into his study a little later, and told him the story. "But the tower is in very good condition, considering its age."

Doubts crept into my mind. "I can only repeat what happened," I insisted steadily. "A stone narrowly missed the children. And it undoubtedly fell from the top of the tower."

Sir Giles stood up with decision. "Have you told anyone else? Will anyone have gone there already?"

I shook my head. "I sent the boys to the nursery and came straight here."

"Good. I shall go and examine it myself." He strode to the door, pausing on the threshold to look back at me. "And, Louise, play it down to the children. It would be unwise to give them a false sense of their danger."

"Of course," I agreed quietly. "I know how nervous children can be—and how their fears can grow from quite small beginnings."

As though on cue for a stage play, that was the very night Hal chose to have a nightmare. It was quite dark when I awoke and lay for a minute, wondering what had woken me before the cry came again. I recognized it for what it was. Reaching for my pink woolen dressing gown, the extravagance of which had once cost me much heart-searching, I hurried along the corridor, not pausing to light a candle.

I found the house much darker than I had expected. Every curtain was drawn against the night air and velvet black filled the house, deadening all sound and filling me with a sense of oppression. Suddenly, a dim flicker of light appeared ahead around a corner and I hurried forward only to pause as the sound of whispering carried faintly to my ears. Something in the hushed whispers made me hesitate, and I found myself straining to hear what was being said.

◆

*Tradition wears a snowy beard.*
*Romance is always young.*

John Greenleaf Whittier
Mary Garvin

". . . no danger at all."

"How dare you," hissed another voice, anger very plain. "Another occurrence like that and I—"

"How very unwise," interrupted the first whisper and I could feel the menace behind the tones.

In my eagerness to discover who was talking I moved forward carelessly and the edge of my wrap, catching against a table, brushed over the candlestick conveniently left there. The voices stopped at the sharp sound and then the light was extinguished, leaving me in total darkness. A furtive scurrying told me that my companions were gone from the corridor in a moment.

After another moment my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and I went on to Hal's room. As so often happens, the nightmare had passed and he was peacefully asleep, his face calm and untroubled in a shaft of moonlight. Just as I was leaving the night nursery, the door of the outer room opened and someone carrying a candle entered.

"Betsy? Is that you?" I asked, one hand on the door knob, a wave of fear sweeping over me as I recalled the wanderers I had so nearly met.

"Giles," announced my husband's kinsman calmly. "I thought I heard Hal cry out."

"So he did, but he's asleep now."

He lifted the candle better to see me and for a moment his eyes seemed to glint strangely above the flickering pale light. Black shadows cast odd plains and hollows on his handsome face. The rich brocade of his dressing gown shimmered slightly as he moved. "Come, Lucy. I'll escort you back to your room as you seem to be without a light."

"Did you meet anyone else awake?" I asked, trying to make my question light and unimportant.

"Should I have?"

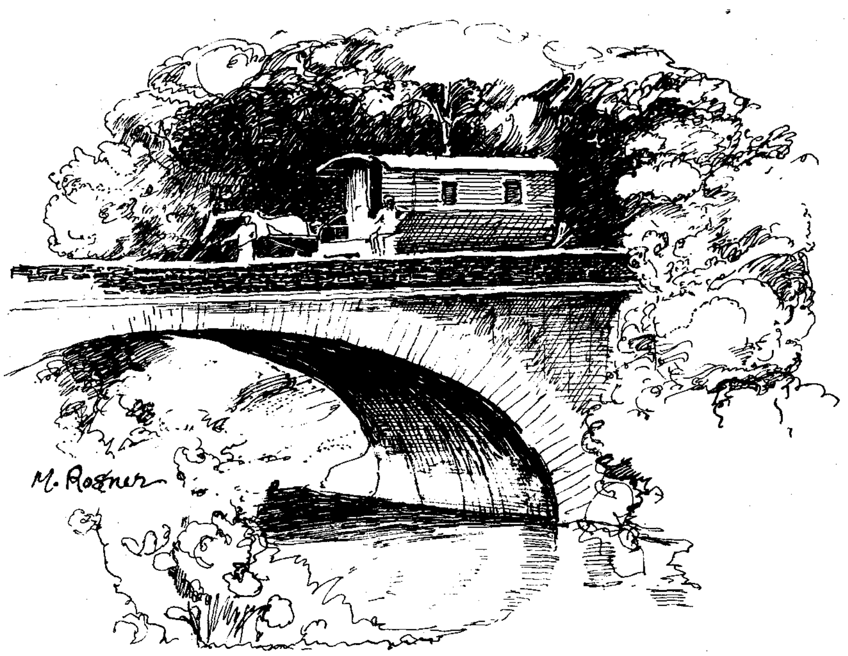
"Yes—no—I mean, I don't know. I thought I heard someone."

"My dear Lucy, I am afraid you are letting your nervous fears take hold. Have you been reading Gothic romances? Isobel always declares herself too afraid to blow out the light after a visit to the lending library."

"You are laughing at me."

"A little," he confessed. "But truly, my dear, who else would be abroad but one of the servants about their legitimate business; or a member of the household struck by somnambulism."

In the face of his steady good sense, I began to wonder if I had really heard the voices, or if they had merely been the figments of a leftover dream. We had reached my room by this time and



Sir Giles put a hand on my arm for a moment.

"I have made arrangements for us to visit London," he said quietly. "I spoke to Isobel before she left, and she suggested that next Monday would give her time to settle in, and give us time to make arrangements."

"It seems a little sudden."

"Doubtless a few days in London will fill Hal's mind with new thoughts. I am sure that Isobel will have planned several delights for us all."

And so I found a very full itinerary awaited us: Visits to various museums and buildings of interest had been planned for Hal, while a dinner or evening party and a trip to the theater were set before me like treats before a child.

One day, I joined Lady Amery in the drawing room, during one of her "at home" afternoons. While we awaited the arrival of her first guest, I stood at the window watching Hal playing ball behind the iron bars of the secluded garden. A hansom cab trotted by and I sighed involuntarily.

"Is something wrong?" inquired Isobel from behind me.

I shook my head. "No, it's just that the sound of a cab is so familiar and evocative. I hadn't realized how I had missed it."

"Don't you like the country?"

I watched her take a tiny stitch in her embroidery to allow me time for consideration, before I answered. "I have lived in so many places and for so short a time that anywhere where I've stayed for more than a few weeks seems like home. When I return to Hampshire you may be sure that Grey Towers will feel like an old friend to me."

"Tell me, Louise," she said. "Do you think it wise to have Harry as companion for Hal? I know, my dear, I have no right to interfere in your affairs, but an outsider can often see things more clearly than one deeply involved. As a newcomer to the situation it struck me that Harry was altogether too strong a character to show Hal to advantage against him."

I nodded unhappily, struck by the sense of what she said. "Hal is only a little boy—and I know he seems immature for his age sometimes."

"Precisely. And Harry Frazer appears much older than his. He is either well advanced—or older than his mother allows."

For a moment, our eyes met before she returned to her embroidery. "Forgive me for saying so, but it appears to me that Hal is continuously being compared to the other boy and found wanting. To a sensitive child it must be very demoralizing."

"I thought it was for the best—that another child to share his lessons and play would be good for him."

"I am sure you did. Perhaps I am wrong—"

We were interrupted by the arrival of the first caller, and for the rest of the afternoon I was introduced to Isobel's friends and acquaintances, and regaled with gossip and tea until my head buzzed with shrill female chatter. Still I was preoccupied with our recent conversation, and was almost glad when the last of the callers took her leave so I could retire to my room to rest before dressing for dinner.

I found myself inexplicably disappointed to find that Sir Giles was not to be present at the evening meal, and even the presence of several highly eligible bachelors could do little to lighten my unaccountably low spirits.

Lord George Amery was a banker and soon bore his cronies off to talk business; while several of the younger men played billiards in another room, the rest of the dinner party settled down to the obvious delights of a musical evening.

By good fortune, I was seated next to a long-bearded gentleman, who by his appearance and bearing could only be a sailor. After a moment he told me he was John Paradine, of the battleship *Courageous*. Pleased to find that my supposition has been correct, I smiled at him more kindly than was warranted and, encouraged, he set out to make himself agreeable. Altogether the evening was more pleasant than I had expected.

Next morning Isobel declared that the weather was fine enough for a drive in Rotten Row.

"Wear a handsome gown, Louise," she counseled, "for everyone goes there to see and be seen. I shall wear my lavender silk, so choose something that will set us both off to advantage."

Taking notice of her advice, I put on a dress of dusty rose pink grosgrain with a matching jacket and bonnet in darker pink trimmed with swansdown. We climbed into the barouche and set off for the park.

Never having driven in an open carriage through the town before, it was a new experience for me, sitting behind the straight backs of the two grooms as they guided us between the high red omnibuses and the black sides of the hansom cabs plying for hire.

"There is sure to be someone I know," Isobel said, looking about. She soon was bowing and smiling at various acquaintances.

A horse drew alongside, and turning my head I saw a familiar bushy beard. "Ma'am, I am delighted to see you," said John Paradine, sweeping his cocked hat from his head.

"I had not expected one of your profession to take his exercise on horseback," I admitted, and allowed him to take my hand. He laughed.

For a while we conversed amicably, but he knew the rules of etiquette and before his presence should become noticeable, he made his excuses and moved off, his broad back a splash of bright blue among the sober riding suits of the other riders.

"Who the devil is that?" inquired a voice forcibly behind me, and I turned quickly to find Sir Giles reining in his mount with tight hands and staring after Captain Paradine.

Lady Amery quipped, "That, my dear Giles, is Louis's Naval beau."

"Be damned if he is," her brother snorted. "Why have I never met the fellow?"

"Because, dear brother, he has spent the last seven years in the China Sea, chasing pirates," she told him calmly.

"Where did you meet him?" he next demanded of me.

"At dinner last night," I answered truthfully, growing a little irritated by his attitude. "Tell me, has it become the new fashion in London to ignore acquaintances—or have you mistaken my age and believe that I should ask your permission to speak to friends?"

His hands clenched the reins and his horse moved restively. When at last he spoke his eyes were clear and his voice coolly polite.

"As your nearest male relative, Louise, I care for you. A lone, personable widow will always attract undesirables—however decorous her behavior."

"Oh, Sir Giles," I sighed, "do you mean that Captain Paradine is a fortune hunter? How wonderful! I must confess that I have never met one before—and he looks so nice—not at all wicked. Indeed he is vastly handsome, don't you think, Isobel? So manly and virile. I am afraid, Sir Giles, that you have only raised my interest."

"Lucy—" he began dangerously, but his sister interrupted quickly.

"Giles! You deserved that. Louise is able to choose her own friends."

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "We all know that you are a 'new woman,' Isobel, and that you believe in female liberation, but pray remember that I am not made of such stuff as George. You would not have your way so easily with me."

The wind fluttered the swansdown trimming my bonnet and stirred a curl on my forehead. For a moment Giles stared at me, an unreadable expression in his eyes, before he touched his riding crop to the brim of his hat and rode purposefully away.

Isobel looked after him reflectively. "What an odd mood he is in," she said. "I wonder if he will come with us to the theater tonight, or beg off. I shall be annoyed if he leaves you without an escort."

Isobel need not have worried, however, for Sir Giles arrived just as I was coming downstairs. Handing his gloves and hat to the butler, he slipped the long red-lined opera cloak from his shoulders and came to escort me down.

"You look delightful," he said warmly, and I felt a surge of pleasure at his praise.

We had all dined early to allow time to arrive at the theater before the curtain rose, and as soon as the carriage was announced we set off.

The gas lamps and crisp autumn air added to the excitement I felt at my first visit to the theater in several years. For a while I gazed out at the dusky evening, watching the twinkling lights on the carriages as they passed, catching fleeting glimpses of the people in their lighted interiors, until I became aware that Sir Giles was watching me.

"You look like a little girl going to her first party."

"That's rather how I feel," I admitted. "I haven't been to the opera since Harry took me—and if anyone had told me a few months ago that I would be sitting in a carriage like this, wearing this expensive gown, I would never have believed them." Impulsively I touched his hand. "You have been very kind. I know that Hal and I have disrupted your household, but you've borne it very well. We both are eternally grateful."

His face softened and he would have said something, but at that moment we arrived outside St. James, and in the excitement of descending from the carriage the moment was lost. Shaking out our dresses, Isobel and I ascended the stairs on the arms of our escorts, squeezing our voluminous skirts into the tiny box reserved for our party.

Elegant chairs were provided for us, but Lord George and Sir Giles were expected to stand behind and view the stage over our shoulders.

A burst of music, and the red velvet curtain rose. For a while the audience murmured and fidgeted, but almost at once I became lost in the story, exhilarated by the music, returning reluctantly to the normal world at the end of the first act.

With a flurry of satin skirts Isobel rose, announcing that she and Lord George were about to promenade. Something made me decline, and suddenly Sir Giles and I were the sole occupants of the box. After a moment he took the seat his sister had vacated, and I grew very aware of being alone with him.

"Why are you staring at me?" I asked nervously.

"All men like to look at a pretty woman," he replied, "and in my case I feel I have played a part in your transformation. When I first met you, Cousin, you were attractive, but a mere moth compared to the butterfly I see tonight."

I gazed at him open-eyed and open-mouthed. As a flush flew to my cheeks I tried to still my agitated breathing. Of course I had taken pains with my dress and knew I looked well, but hearing a compliment from Sir Giles filled me with surprise.

I answered a little breathlessly, "Sweet words from you, sir, come as a shock. I am ready for chiding or commanding, and would know what to say—but compliments find me at a loss."

"You put me to shame, Lucy," he answered soberly. "Am I really so hard and unfeeling?"

"Oh, no! Indeed, I did not mean—" I began in confusion, scarcely knowing precisely what I did mean, but was saved from further embarrassment by the return of Lord and Lady Amery.

The rest of the evening passed almost in a dream. I watched the opera without being aware of what was happening on the stage and, filled with my own confusing thoughts, was very quiet on the way home.

The next day, still in a dream, I decided to take a long walk. As I returned home it was almost dusk. The busy road was filled with traffic, swirls of London mist drifted between elegant carriages and laden drays and wagons, while gas lamps made pools of light in the chill, damp air.

Shivering, I pulled the neck of my jacket higher and tried to attract the attention of a passing cab. Unfortunately all seemed to be engaged and I hesitated, uncertain of what to do, when I suddenly became aware that a man was watching from the shelter of a shop doorway.

At that moment he stepped out of the shadows and I could see he was dressed in a check suit, a little too loud to be tasteful. However, his bow was creditable enough and I caught a whiff of hair oil as he raised his bowler.

"May I be of assistance?" he asked. "You seem to be in some distress."

"I am waiting for someone," I replied promptly.

The lamplight gleamed on a gold filling as he smiled and settled his hat back on his head at a jaunty angle. "Then may I be allowed to wait with you?"

"No, thank you." I spoke curtly and turned a shoulder on him, anxiously scanning the hurrying traffic.

"Madam, even if you *are* awaiting someone, which I take leave to doubt, you will find yourself grateful for the presence of a gentleman. These streets at this time of night are no place for a lady."

Although his tone was ordinary enough and his words even sensible, there was something about his demeanor that made me uneasy, and when he put his hand on my arm I shook it off in no uncertain manner.

"Please go away. I have no need of help." With a sigh of relief I saw an empty cab approaching and eagerly hailed it, gathering up my skirt to enter it in a flash.

But when I saw the driver give the man behind me a knowing look, I stepped back, colliding into the check-suited man with violence. His hard fingers closed around my arm, biting into the flesh with bruising force.

"In you go, my lovely," he whispered into my ear, and prepared to thrust me into the cab. At that moment another vehicle drew up alongside and a figure jumped to the ground.

"Release her!" commanded a threatening voice. Hands seized my captor by the shoulder and spun him round to face his assailant.

As I was set free the cabby behind me whipped his horses and sped off, while a fist sent the man in the loud suit sprawling headlong across the damp pavement.

"Get in the cab, Cousin," ordered Sir Giles.

I sank down in the dark interior of the cab with some relief. Moments later Sir Giles shouted instructions to the driver, and the vehicle moved on its springs as he joined me in the confined space.

"Thank you," I said tremulously, clasping my shaking hands together in my lap as I turned to him. Whatever reaction I had expected, it was *not* an explosion of anger, and I sat shocked under the tirade directed at me.

"What madness possessed you, Cousin?" he demanded. "If Maggie had not told me of your senseless expedition you might well have been on your way to some stew in the East End by now. Have you no more sense than a child? Have you no idea how a gentlewoman behaves?"

"I had no idea it was so late," I defended myself weakly, "and how was I to know that—"

"That evil men were lying in wait for such as you to carry you off to some brothel," he said harshly. The thought seemed to incense him more. "Good God, Louise, I've borne much for you, but even your previous actions had not prepared me for this. I began to think that my mother Beatrice was right when she declared you unfit in every way to make a wife for her son!"

I gasped at his words. "How dare you set yourself up to judge me!" I cried. "Because you have money and position you think that you may dictate orders and humiliate people—that you are superior to everyone else. That, because you dispense your largesse with a condescending air, I should be obsequious and accept your ill temper and bad manners with gratitude."

The stillness in the cab warned me that I had gone too far. Indeed, I knew that my recent assault and Sir Giles's unexpected attack had made me say more than was pardonable and much that was untrue.

"I must apologize if that is how my behavior seems to you," he said icily. His voice made me shiver. "Believe me, I had no expectations of gratitude when I offered you a place in my home."

I bit my lip and sobbed, turning my face away that he might not see my distress until we arrived at Markham Square.

His hand under my arm was coldly impersonal as he helped me out of the cab, and his face only showed an implacable expression, unimpressed by the tears that I made no attempt to hide. Waiting only until my foot was on the first step of the house, he climbed back into the hansom cab and was driven quickly away.

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*Each moment of a happy lover's hour*
*Is worth an age of dull and common life.*

Aphra Behn
Younger Brother

Lord George saw me to the train the next morning. Unlike my first journey into Hampshire, when only Hal and Betsy accompanied me, I now had a footman to add his manly presence, and I could not help reflecting upon the other journeys when I had Sir Giles for company. Before I left, Isobel told me that Giles had accepted an invitation from Lord Ash to hunt in Norfolk, and would not return to Grey Towers for at least a month.

The rolling Hampshire countryside with its tall trees clothed in the last of their autumn glory seemed strangely familiar, and I even felt a pang of warmth as I caught sight of the ugly modern building that comprised our home.

Mrs. Heath was waiting for my arrival with a welcoming tea tray, eager to hear of the delights of London, nodding and exclaiming over the people I had met and recalling events of her own visits there.

Hal and I settled back into our routine as easily as if we had never been away. Recalling Isobel's words, I saw a little uneasily how Harry seemed to have taken the opportunity of making himself useful, and noticed he was often the bearer of Mrs. Heath's messages. To be sure, he ran her errands willingly, appearing to enjoy the feeling of importance it gave him. I had to admit that his sunny smile was a pleasure to behold; unfortunately his open countenance gave the quieter Hal the appearance of being withdrawn or sullen, and much as I wanted my own son to be liked, I knew that Harry was the greater favorite.

One day while taking tea Mrs. Heath suddenly inquired, "Dear Mr. Tullet is such a personable young man, is he not?" She referred to the Vicar, and smiled archly at me.

"I find him very pleasant," I agreed.

"A younger son, of course," she leaned nearer to say, "but one of *the* Tullets, you know. With the right wife behind him to strengthen his ambitions, he should go far. A bishop, no less. How would you like to be high in Church society, my dear Louise?"

"I?" I stared at her. "I am afraid that I have never thought of it."

She raised her hand in a deprecating gesture. "Of course, of course. We shall say no more on the matter. But let me just say how eminently suitable the match would be; so right for both of you—I never could abide those mismatches with disparity on one side which can only lead to acrimony! Now, dear Giles is a person in question," she went on. "The number of ladies who have thrown themselves at his feet would astound you—and all to no avail. I can assure you that he is well aware of his own consequence and knows what is due to his position."

"Are you warning me off?" I asked bluntly, anger making me bold. "Because if you are, let me tell you that no matter how high his consequence and how aristocratic his position, I would not marry him if he were the last man alive. I find him abominable, and his manners too high and stiff to be acceptable—even from a gentleman. I am sure that his estimate of himself far exceeds anything you may feel for him."

I dropped her a fierce curtsey and marched out, puzzled by her reaction. I had expected anger, but instead I had seen something like triumph in her eyes as she listened to my torrent of words.

To my surprise the outburst was not mentioned again. Mrs. Heath seemed to forget that I had ever lost my temper and greeted me serenely when we met.

The season wore on. Suddenly the leaves had all fallen and lay in crisp brown heaps beneath the trees, while bright red berries adorned the hedgerows. We awoke to hoarfrosts and thick mists each morning.

Grey Towers settled into the winter routine of huge fires and drawn curtains, secure and comfortable—but incredibly dull. The stupefying boredom of each day seemed to grow around me like a cocoon until one day the house suddenly seemed to awake, tense with excitement, and I knew the master was expected home.

He arrived late the next afternoon. I watched from behind the shelter of a curtain as he climbed down from the carriage in the gathering dusk. For a moment he glanced up at my window, his face a pale blur, and I drew back in case he should see me. When I looked again he was gone.

I entered the dining room that evening and I saw to my dismay that Mrs. Heath was not down yet, and that Sir Giles was alone. As I hesitated on the threshold he turned from the fireplace, the candles reflecting in the mirror above his head. For a moment he regarded me, then inclined his glossy head slightly.

"Good evening, Louise," he said quietly, breaking the spell that held me.

"I hope you had a good journey," I said, surprised to find that my voice sounded so calm. "Did you enjoy your visit to Norfolk?"

I came forward into the candlelight, aware of the scrutiny that passed over my sapphire-blue velvet gown and lingered on my carefully arranged hair.

"Hal is well?" he inquired, folding his hands behind his back under his long coattails.

"Very well," I said, aware of the constraint between us. For the first time at Grey Towers, I was somewhat relieved when Mrs. Heath arrived.

We were well into November and the festive season approached with all its usual speed. Knowing that Hal wanted to visit the nearby small town to buy his Christmas presents, and wishing to purchase material for a fancy dress to wear at Mrs. Heath's annual costume ball, I arranged that Mrs. Frazer, the children and I, accompanied by Mr. Dunn, should drive into Hindhurst early the next week.

The day planned for our excursion dawned with a hard frost, but gave promise of a clear sky to come. We set off in a closed carriage with Mr. Dunn riding escort alongside. The boys were wild with anticipation, clutching their spending money in tight fingers. Emily Frazer's blue-gray skirt almost filled the seat opposite me and I examined her covertly, wondering at the air of quiet pretense even her dull and serviceable clothes could not hide.

Feeling my gaze, she looked up, and our eyes met. For a moment she returned my glance, her eyes cool before she smiled slightly.

"The children have been looking forward to this trip."

"So I have noticed. And you, Mrs. Frazer?"

She appeared startled. "I? I regard it as one of my duties."

"I hoped you would view it with more pleasure than that," I told her. "I shall take Hal with me after lunch. You and Harry may do as you wish until it is time to return home."

"Thank you. That is very kind of you," she said calmly, her self-possession irritating me.

Heedless of what Mrs. Heath would say on the subject of etiquette, I dismissed the children's tutor at the inn where we would leave the horses until the return journey, determined to shop alone with only Hal for escort.

Hindhurst's main street was a hive of small shops, each old-fashioned window a multitude of goods on display behind its small panes. As we peered into a milliner's, Hal smothered a delighted exclamation, and enjoining me to wait, dashed inside. An enormous overblown red rose disappeared from the display, and he appeared again clutching a large tissue paper bag to his bosom with a pleased expression on his face. "You'll never guess what I've bought you for Christmas," he said happily.

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*Love must be fostered with soft words.*

Ovid
Ars Amatoria

By dint of much thought and a great deal of management, we managed to stretch his pocket money to buy a rubber ball for Harry, a penknife for Sir Giles, handkerchiefs for Mrs. Heath and Lady Caroline, and an india rubber for Mrs. Frazer. He flatly refused to even contemplate a present for Mr. Dunn.

"I don't like him," he reiterated, shaking his head stubbornly. I forbade to force him.

I had decided to go to the ball as a lavender girl, and as soon as our purchases were complete, went in search of suitable material, choosing plain lavender-colored silk for the dress and a delicately printed white for the underskirt.

Pleased with ourselves Hal and I turned back to the inn, when suddenly I caught a blonde woman across the dusky road engaging the tutor in earnest conversation. The short winter day was ending, and as a lamplighter climbed his ladder to ignite a gas jet above their figures, I felt sure the woman must be Mrs. Frazer.

Somewhat to my surprise, we found Mrs. Frazer and Harry already in the parlor of the inn, giving every appearance of having been there for hours.

"Goodness!" I was unable to stop myself from exclaiming. "However did you manage to be here before us? I only stopped to buy a length of ribbon."

"I do not understand, Mrs. Grey," she said politely.

"Hal and I saw you talking to Mr. Dunn only a few minutes ago, when we were on our way here, and yet you managed to arrive first."

"I am afraid you must be mistaken," she said, shaking her head. "I have not seen Mr. Dunn since he left here earlier."

Shrugging my shoulders, I decided to let the matter drop; nevertheless I felt sure I had seen the governess and the tutor under the street light.

"I would not find it exceptional if it *had* been you," I told her. "After all, you both live under the same roof."

"It was not I," she repeated. "Mr. Dunn and I have so social contract."

Wondering at her emphatic denial, I gathered up my parcels prior to leaving the room, deciding that there must be an attraction between them which she wished to keep secret. Knowing how difficult employers could be over such matters, I felt a growing sympathy for her and, tucking my hands deep inside my fur muff, set out to make the journey home as pleasant as possible.

Lady Caroline had asked me to buy her some skeins of white wool, and consequently I took them to her the next morning. The cold winter sun filled her room with its pale light, playing across the warm rug that covered her knees as she sat before the fire.

"Well, gal, come in and close the door. You know I don't care for a draft."

"Here's your wool," I said, setting the paper bundle in her lap. I knelt in front of the fire and held my dulled fingers to the blaze. "You are very snug in here," I said enviously.

"Feel the cold, do you? Never did in my days. You young women nowadays haven't any blood in your veins! A quick gallop across the park would do you good."

"Perhaps," I said reflectively, thinking that the thought of riding again was not as unpleasant as it had been a few months ago.

"Giles is here," said the old lady. "Why don't you ride out with him? If I know anything, he's out every morning. You could take that boy of yours too. Might do him good to see you on horseback." Lady Caroline cast a knowledgeable eye out of the window. "We've had a frost every morning for over a week. It wouldn't surprise me if the river is freezing over—it starts from the sides, you know, and works its way to the middle. It takes quite a while before it is thick enough to bear anyone. You keep an eye on young Hal—I've heard tales of children being drowned when they fell through the ice."

"I shall," I promised, an uneasy shudder running down my spine at the thought of Hal plunging into the dark waters under the ice.

Although I left her room without intending to take her advice, the next morning found me dressed in my riding habit, having sent a message to the stables that Bess and Rollo should be saddled. Collecting an uneasy Hal from the nursery, I went down to the breakfast room in search of Sir Giles. He looked up in surprise as we entered, taking in our attire with a quick glance.

"We wondered if you would be good enough to allow us to accompany you this morning," I said a little breathlessly as he rose.

"I seem to be presented with a *fait accompli*," he said lightly.

"If you'd rather not—" I said quickly.

"No, truly, Lucy, I should like nothing better," he said disarmingly. "It's a lovely day for a ride."

And so I found when we rode away from the house across the crisp, frosty grass of the park towards the distant trees and river. The horses blew clouds of steam into the cold air and jingled their harnesses, eager to stretch their legs. For once I felt at ease on Bess's broad back, while Hal sat Rollo with very few signs of his usual apprehension.

Beyond the belt of trees, but before the park ended, the river widened and became broad and still, and here we found the water gradually freezing, ice creeping out from the banks and among the rushes towards the slow moving center. Sir Giles's horse jerked his head and pawed at the ice with a front hoof.

"We'll be skating soon," announced his rider with satisfaction. "Do you skate, Lucy?"

"No, I've never had the opportunity."

"We'll hunt you out some skates from the attic. There are bound to be some to fit the boys, too. There's nothing better, I promise you."

I nodded a little doubtfully, recalling the prints I had seen of cold winter scenes and skaters skimming gracefully over frozen ponds.

"It's not difficult," Sir Giles assured me, reading my expression rightly. "You'll soon manage it."

"I only hope I don't disappoint you again!"

"My dear Lucy, when have you ever disappointed me?"

Looking away from his questioning gaze, I smoothed the folds of my skirt. "Quite often, I believe," I answered soberly.

"Indeed not! You surprise me often, I must confess, but very rarely have I been disappointed." He put his hands lightly over mine, and I slowly raised my eyes to meet his gaze.

The low sun almost blinded me, but it seemed that his eyes held so unusual an expression that surprise snatched my breath away.

"I have been meaning to apologize for some time," I began without preamble, before I should lose courage. "I am truly sorry for what I said in London. I know it is quite untrue and—"

"My dear Louise, say no more," he said easily. "We both have wretched tempers and shall put the blame entirely upon them." With a gallant gesture he took my hand and carried it to his lips.

"*Pax,* Lucy?" he asked, his eyes violet in the bright sunshine.

"*Pax,* Sir Giles," I returned a little breathlessly.

As he released my hand and we rode on, I saw a figure turn hurriedly away from one of the ground floor windows of the house, and recognizing the gentian blue dress, knew that Mrs. Heath had witnessed the little scene.

The weather grew colder. Freezing drafts seemed to creep into every corner, and in spite of all the servants' efforts with huge fires and plentiful supplies of coal, Grey Towers was unpleasantly cold. Despite her warm rugs, Lady Caroline took a chill and retired to bed with hot bricks and a bottle of Dr. Black's physic. For a few days we were anxious and arranged that she should not be left alone.

I was sitting with her one evening after dinner embroidering a velvet bag as a Christmas present for Isobel. She was particularly restless and I rose to give her some medicine. She drank the red liquid obediently and lay back against her pillows, her strange-colored eyes bright with fever.

"Do you know what Beatrice said to Harry?" she asked suddenly. "She told him to amuse himself with the soldier's girl, but not to marry her. What do you think of that?"

I didn't answer, telling myself that she did not know what she was saying, while from the bed the high, excited voice went on.

"He was one for the ladies . . . they couldn't resist him, but once or twice he was nearly caught . . . I wish he had written. . . "

Her voice grew fretful and I leaned closer, trying to forget what else she had said. "He *did* write, Lady Carrie," I said, holding one of her hot, thin hands in mine. "Harry did write to you."

Suddenly she looked at me, her eyes clear and sensible again. "Did he, Lucy?" she asked eagerly, and I nodded. "I think Beatrice must have kept them," she murmured. Her eyes closed and her rapid breathing slowed. Soon she was alseep.

Suddenly the river was frozen over; at last the two sides of ice had met and fused. The house was alive with excitement and the servants could talk of nothing else. While Sir Giles organized a hunt for skates in the attic, all thought of studies left the boys' heads, until Mrs. Frazer and Mr. Dunn conceded defeat and reluctantly declared a holiday.

For a while the river became our main source of enjoyment, and to his overwhelming delight, Hal found something at which he excelled. For once he was better than Harry, who exhibited an unexpected fear of the slippery ice and stayed near the bank among the reeds. The younger boy skimmed and swooped on his skates, reminding me of the effortless flying of a bird.

Mr. Dunn proved equally proficient on the ice, amazing us with his skill and grace, until he reminded us that he had spent some time in America, where cold winters were common and most people could skate from early childhood. Sir Giles was good, but with none of John Dunn's panache. I liked nothing better than to have Giles pushing me along in the sledge, his steady presence of pace filling me with a sense of both flying and security, which I found delightful.

Each day we awoke to fly to our windows and peer out at the weather, praying that the thaw had not arrived overnight, hurrying through our work until we could escape to the river and our fairyland of ice. All went well, until one day a warmer breeze than usual seemed to blow, and Sir Giles warned us all to watch out for thinning ice. I had walked a little way along the river to the shelter of some trees. Here the river bent in a sharp curve, and by mutual consent no one skated beyond this bend. A fallen tree trunk gave me a view of the skaters, and I had been sitting on it for a while when two figures detached themselves from the crowd and skated towards me. Soon I could distinguish Hal's red jersey and the slim figure of the tutor behind.

They seemed to be engaged in a game of tag and I watched idly in some amusement as they drew nearer. It was not until they rounded the bend at speed that I noticed the dark patch of broken ice ahead of them. John Dunn slowed and fell behind, while Hal flashed ahead, laughing over his shoulder. Jumping to my feet, I shouted and waved my muff as Hal headed straight towards the black, sharp-edged hole. Suddenly Mr. Dunn started forward at renewed speed to stretch forward a long arm and catch the flying figure in front of him, swinging the boy round in a long curve to safety.

The ice spurted from their skates as I sank onto the tree trunk, closing my eyes in relief. Yet some disquiet inside me wondered at Mr. Dunn's actions. Surely he had seen the hole in the ice as well as I; yet he made no move to stop or warn Hal until I had made my presence known. Indeed, at one time he appeared to be chasing my Hal towards it.

Shaking off such preposterous thoughts, I resolved to place the stretch of river beyond the bend firmly out of bounds.

Next morning the world was adrip, and to my relief the ice had almost vanished overnight. Mrs. Heath emerged from the seclusion of her parlor with plans for the Christmas ball complete, and suddenly the festive season was upon us, making up with all its accompanying excitement for the sad lack of ice skating. Aromas of spices and meats wafted enticingly from behind the green baize door that lead downstairs, and interesting parcels were wrapped and hidden in unexpected places. The children grew noisy and silly on suppressed excitement, while I looked forward with very mixed emotions to my first Christmas spent at Grey Towers.

Christmas Eve brought a return of the cold weather, very much to our relief, for if the roads remained deep in mud and impassable, the attendance at the Christmas ball would be disappointing. Isobel and Lord George had arrived a few days earlier, and with their presence we all felt that the holiday had really begun.

Tired by the activities of the day, which included taking presents to all the villagers and estate workers, I fell asleep that night with my mind full of Christmas carols, twinkling, decorated trees and heavily clothed, bearded men, stamping their frozen feet and burying their moustaches in steaming mugs of mulled wine.

I awoke to a bitterly cold day and the windows covered in frosty patterns. While I was sipping my hot chocolate, Hal burst in to present me with the enormous rose he had bought in Hindhurst, which I later pinned to my bodice and wore with as much aplomb as I could muster.

Sir Giles blinked a little at first sight of me, but on meeting my eyes hastily controlled himself and congratulated Hal on his choice of a present.

While the children vanished into a corner to play with their treasures, we adults turned to our own presents. I was still exclaiming over the workbox Isobel had given me, when a shadow fell upon me and Sir Giles dropped a package into my lap.

"Thank you for my books," he said gravely, sitting beside me. "How did you know I wanted them?"

I had given him the three volumes of Mr. Dickens's new novel, and answered, suddenly shy, "I heard you talking to Lord George when we were in London."

Excited, I unwrapped the box in my lap to discover a heavy cut-glass bottle of perfume. Removing the gold top with shaking hands, I dabbed some of the perfume upon my wrists, thanking him quickly. "I've never had anything like it before," I said truthfully, admiring the way the light struck sparks of color from the sharp corners of the clear glass.

Altogether that Christmas was the most memorable of my life, rivaling even those of my childhood for happiness. There seemed to be an almost tangible link between Sir Giles and me, and whenever our eyes met I felt a surge of happiness as I had not experienced for years.

That night, when we ladies retired and the gentlemen stood at the foot of the stairs to hand us our lighted candles, and bid us goodnight; it seemed to me that Sir Giles held my hand longer than was strictly necessary and that his eyes held a message only I could read.

Brushing my hair in my room later, I allowed myself to accept what my heart had told me for a long time . . . which made it all the worse when I realized next day that Sir Giles was absolutely avoiding my company, and that his gaze was cold and impersonal, whenever our glances met.

Puzzling over the conundrum, I wondered if I had read more into his actions than he intended, but as nothing had been said, I knew I could not mention my bewilderment to him.

The men returned from hunting at dusk just in time to dress for the ball. We all had to wait in the hall to greet our guests, where Sir Giles studiously

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*The seaman on the wave, love,*
*When storm and tempest rave, love*
*Look to one star to save, love,*
*Thou art that star to me!*

John Tyler
To Julia Gardiner Tyler

avoided me, turning a black velvet shoulder towards me while he talked to the others.

Edmond Tullet, the Vicar, was among the first to arrive and made no effort to hide his admiration as he looked at me.

"Charming, my dear Mrs. Grey, that costume becomes you to perfection."

Aware of Sir Giles's grim gaze, I deliberately simpered and smiled up into the Vicar's face.

"May I have the honor?" he asked, and led me into the ballroom as the orchestra struck up a waltz.

Looking back, I was gratified to see Sir Giles staring after us with a scowl that matched his highwayman costume, and some devil prompted me to hang closer onto the Vicar's arm and gaze limpidly up at him.

The guests had arrived quickly, and the scene in the ballroom took away my breath. Lord George and Lady Isobel in complementary Court dress of pink satin led out the first dance, while Mrs. Heath, obviously dressed as Marie Antoinette in ice-blue silk, sailed by on Sir Giles's black-sleeved arm. The opulence of the scene made me blink, almost dazzled by the shifting colors and swirling figures of the dancers. I had never seen anything like it, and the wealth and position of the Greys was brought home to me as it had never been before.

The evening wore on in a kaleidoscope of dances and partners. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a black-clad figure bowed before me and Sir Giles claimed the next dance.

Like a hero from a play he stood over me, the silver velvet and lace suiting his tall figure to perfection, his violet eyes glinting through the slits of the black mask that made him appear almost a stranger, and I caught my breath as he drew me irresistibly to my feet.

His hand was firm on my waist and I leaned back against his strength as my feet followed his. Dancers dipped and swayed around us, while I gazed at Sir Giles's lace cravat, and knew that my fingers on his shoulder were trembling. He waltzed me purposefully across the room and out into the empty hall. Here he removed his hand from my waist, but still retained his grip on my arm, as he marched me across the tiled floor. We entered the library, and, releasing me, he went to stand by the fire. He abruptly turned back to the room. "Yesterday, as you have guessed, I was on the verge of making a declaration that I was persuaded you would find not to your disliking; but later I was brought to my senses and made to see that which was only too clear to others, and to which only my own feelings blinded me."

In a flash I perceived the implication behind his words. "Since your mother seems to know my feelings better than I do myself," I retorted, "perhaps you would have the goodness to repeat them to me."

"I will do nothing of the kind. The conversation was entirely private."

"Very well." I stood up with a resolve I was far from feeling. "I shall ask her myself."

His voice stopped me at the door. "Only a factory girl would make a scene at a ball."

I smiled over my shoulder, "What an exceedingly stupid remark—or is your factory girl named Cinderella? Either you will tell me what your meddlesome, malicious mother said, or I promise I shall do my best to make this ball the one that lives longest in local memory."

"Very well," he gave in with a show of indifference. "She merely felt it her duty to repeat a few of your own remarks upon the subject of marriage and of my own unsuitability as a partner in particular."

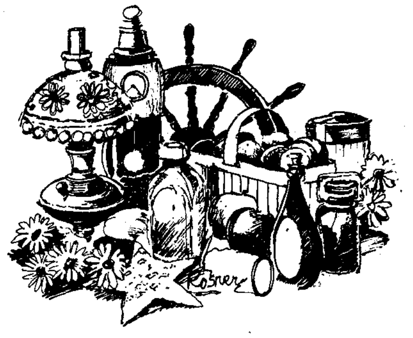
"I am sure she enjoyed every minute—"

"Do you deny it?"

His question brought me up short, and remembering my rash words, I knew that I could not give Beatrice Heath the lie. "No. I did say something very much like the conversation she reported to you. But there were circumstances, which while not an excuse, make my words more understandable." My own temper had flown, and I turned my burning forehead against the cool wooden door. "Did she also point out my own shortcomings?"

He gave a short laugh. "There was no need. I am only too aware of them already. You have the temper of a fishwife and the morals more usually associated with a ballet dancer than a lady."

"Doubtless you are more acquainted with ladies of the stage than I," I returned through my teeth.



"Your behavior in London with the Naval gentleman and tonight with the estimable Vicar gave the distinct impression that you number the disreputable ladies among your friends, and make every effort to mold your morals on theirs."

Suddenly he moved away from the fireplace, coming quickly across the room to me, and some instinct of danger made me start back against the door, feeling behind me for the handle. Leaning both hands on the door beside my shoulders he made me prisoner, and with his face framed by his elegant powdered wig and his costume of black velvet and lace, he looked like someone from another age—a dangerous, less civilized age than ours. I was suddenly afraid.

"And if you feel free to flirt with every Tom, Dick and Harry who turns an eye in your direction, why should I be kept at arm's length? If you play with fire, Lucy Grey, you must expect to burn your fingers," he said quietly, the lazy drawl back in his voice.

Slowly he bent his head and easily stifling my repudiation, he kissed me, his mouth hard and cruel, deliberately hurting. Then he stood back a little, watching me with an unfathomable expression.

"How dare you!" I cried, brushing my hand across my mouth and blinking away angry tears of mortification. "I had not expected such treatment from you."

His expression altered a little and he put out a hand in a half-gesture.

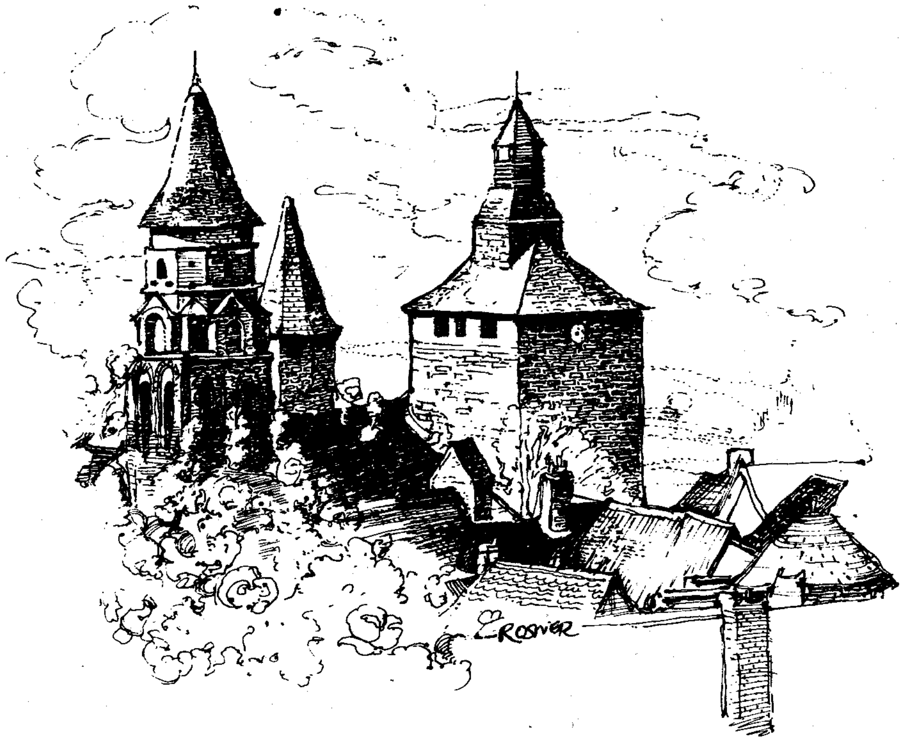
"My dear Louise—"

My self-control almost broke and I stamped my foot. "Don't call me your dear Louise, in that horrid, supercilious manner," I cried. "Once I was Lucy!"

And brushing aside his hand I dragged open the heavy door and ran from the room. Luckily the hall was empty and I managed to reach my room without anyone seeing me. I knew that I must leave Grey Towers, no matter what hardship it caused, but first I must control myself enough to return to the ballroom before my absence was noted and caused gossip.

Dabbing water on my heated face, I fought against the tears that threatened to overwhelm me, and at last regained a modicum of calm.

Listening to the music from downstairs, I recognized a Scottish reel and knew Harry was performing a dance his mother had taught him. Both boys had been practicing for weeks: Harry in the tartan kilt of his ancestors cut a



dashing figure, which I knew would please everyone, while Hal, not so blessed in his forebears, had to make do with a less romantic sailor suit and hornpipe.

A burst of applause announced the end of the interval and I sighed, knowing I must return to the guests downstairs. Wanting to delay the moment as long as possible, I lingered in front of the glass, patting my hair, retying the strings of my tight bodice and putting perfume to my wrists and temples. Touching the heavy cut glass bottle made tears fill my eyes again.

Suddenly peering round the door, Isobel saw me and came into the room. "Is Hal in here?" she asked quickly, a shade of anxiety in her voice.

I shook my head. "No. Surely he's in the ballroom. Has he danced his hornpipe yet?"

Her eyes were worried. "That's just it. He hasn't and I can't find him."

"I heard Harry's music," I said. "Wasn't Hal to have performed first?"

Isobel sighed unhappily. "Mother insisted that *Harry* should dance first—you know how she is at times—somehow one is maneuvered into doing what she wants without quite knowing how it happens. Anyway, Harry performed first. He and his mother were obviously pleased—while Hal very clearly was upset." Isobel sank down into a chair and made a helpless gesture. "I can't find him, Lucy. I'm afraid—"

And suddenly, I was too. "I'll go and look in the outbuildings," I said with decision.

The stables and outbuildings were dark and quite empty of any small boy, and a hollow, sick feeling settled in my stomach as I turned back to the house. Somehow the servant's hall had heard the news and on my return I was greeted by the head groom, Maggie's father, with offers to search the grounds.

"I should be very grateful, but what of the guests—hadn't we better ask Sir Giles?"

At that moment he arrived, pausing only to touch my arm reassuringly, before arranging search parties to cover the house and park.

"It's so cold," I whispered. "He'll freeze if he's gone out. And there's ice on the river again."

A thought struck us both and for a moment our eyes met in horrified supposition.

"He can't have gone skating," I gasped.

"The skates were oiled and put back in the attic," said Sir Giles, turning with the words and running up the back staircase. Within minutes he was back, his face unusually grim. "The ones he wore are missing," he told me quietly, stifling my involuntary movement with a hand on my arm.

Seizing an oil lamp and calling for men to bring ropes and a ladder, he flung open the outer door, commanding me to stay in the house, and vanished into the darkness outside.

Unheeding his abrupt order, I snatched a shawl from a hook on the door and followed, running across the lawn in the wake of the bobbing lamps. The grass was crisp and hard underfoot, but I knew that the frost was not severe enough to have made the river solid enough to bear any weight.

The dark figures streamed across the moonlit park, making grotesque shadows on the grass. Gasping and panting, I caught up with them on the river bank, wondering with dread why they were all so quiet. Then I followed their gazes and saw the lonely, silent figure, gliding effortlessly, and making patterns on the smooth ice.

"Hal," I panted, and Sir Giles heard my faint whisper.

"Call him, Lucy," he said quietly, taking my hand. "Call him as though it were any ordinary day and you wanted him to come in to tea. Whatever you do, don't frighten or startle him."

I looked up into his eyes which seemed as pale and cold as the moonlight itself, and trembled a little. Gathering both my hands in his, he smiled down at me reassuringly.

Slowly I walked to the river's edge and taking a deep breath called across the ice. At my voice Hal's head turned and he lifted a hand in answer.

"He said you'd come," he called happily. "Watch me," and I closed my eyes as he spun on the points of his skates.

"Call him," a voice behind me urged.

"Hal! Come in now. You'll get cold."

The small figure paused and made to obey me, but at that moment there was a sharp crack and a cobweb of black lines appeared on the surface of the ice.

I was thrust aside and Sir Giles's broad shoulders blocked my view. "Get down," he shouted. "Lie down on the ice, Hal—and *stay still.*"

Someone tied a rope about the black velvet waist of his highwayman suit, while others slid the ladder across the ice.

As though in a dream I watched the distant silhouetted figure on the ice, so small and still, while the other edged slowly along the rungs of the ladder towards him. Hands touched and the man slowly drew Hal nearer until he could back along the way he had come, bringing the child with him. Arms stretched out to them eagerly and pulled them up to the bank and safety.

Torn between laughter and tears I flew to them, and clasping them in my arms, hugged them both indiscriminately. "Giles and Hal, I thought I had lost you both. Hal, whatever made you do such a thing?" I asked, covering his cold face in kisses.

"I wanted you all to watch me—I'm better at skating than Harry," he exclaimed naively. Sir Giles handed him into the waiting arms of Maggie's father, who ran ahead with him to the warmth of the house.

And with his going, the full realization of what might have happened struck me. Abruptly the stars and moon whirled around my head and my heart pounded in my ears. I would have fallen, but a strong arm held me and I was supported against Sir Giles's chest. Velvet was soft under my cheek and I lay still for longer than was really necessary, enjoying the moment.

Returning to the house and the crowd of excited men and women, Sir Giles and I could have been alone. We did not speak, but I was aware of his every movement, of every breath he took, and his arm about my waist seemed to charge my body with excitement.

Pausing at the foot of the back stairs, I heard the sounds of music and hilarity, and suddenly realized that we had only been away from the house for a matter of minutes, although it had seemed like a lifetime to me.The ball was still at its height.

"I must go back to my guests," Sir Giles said quietly.

"Yes." I gave him my hand, turning with one foot on the first stair. "How can I thank you?"

His grasp was warm as he carried my hand to his lips, and I took a quick breath as he raised his head to hold my eyes in a long look. "I'll see you later," he promised, before turning abruptly and striding away, his leather boots heavy against the floorboards.

Hal was already in a warm bath when I walked into the nursery. With a warning glance to Betsy, who was obviously bursting with curiosity and anger, I seated myself in a chair beside the fire and endeavored to fill his mind with childish chatter—anything other than the lucky escape he had just had.

"Don't go," he said, as we tucked him into bed, his hand clinging to me. Reading the sick fear in his eyes I smoothed back the fair hair from his forehead and assured him I would stay.

The house was quiet, the ball long since over and the inhabitants of Grey Towers shut away in their own rooms, when I heard the outer door open quietly and footsteps cross to the night nursery. The door opened softly and a figure appeared in the dark opening. Half-rising from my seat by the bed, I waited tensely for the man to enter, and sighed audibly with relief when the dim glow of the nightlight revealed Sir Giles.

He had changed into a soft smoking jacket and now appeared his familiar self as he approached the bed.

After a moment he took my arm and led me into the adjoining room, leaving the door to the nursery ajar, while he bent over the warm ashes in the fireplace, and blew them into flame.

"It was John Dunn," I said quietly, as I sat and watched him. "Hal told me before he went to sleep. He suggested to Hal that if he went skating it would make us all admire him."

Sir Giles sat back on his heels and gazed into the fire. "I know," he said.

"But why?" I asked helplessly. As my companion remained silent, I went on, "And the other mishaps, the block of stone at the ruined tower, and the time Hal nearly skated into the hole in the ice . . . were they him too?" My words hung in the air and I shook my head to rid myself of my thoughts. "Why, Giles? Was he mad?"

"While Isobel was looking for Hal this evening, she came upon a book in Mrs. Frazer's room. On the flyleaf was the name Emily Dunn." He reached forward and carefully placed a few pieces of coal on the glowing fire.

I frowned and studied him. "Dunn! But that must mean—"

"Precisely. Our governess is John Dunn's wife."

"I don't know why I'm surprised," I finally admitted, remembering the times I had seen them together and recalling the air of conspiracy that surrounded them. "But that does not explain Hal's accidents."

"No," Sir Giles agreed, and for a few moments I thought he would say no more. At last he put down the poker with an air of resolution and turned to me. "My dear, I hope this won't hurt you too much, but have you ever thought that Harry resembled anyone?"

I looked at him, puzzled. "Well, he's fair—like Mr. Dunn, I suppose, if he's his father." Sir Giles shook his head slightly and I knew I must try again, more honestly this time. "He—I've thought it quite impossible, but at times he has reminded me of Isobel and . . . I've thought that he and Hal might be," my voice died away as I realized all the implications of what I was about to say.

Sir Giles gathered my hands into his and held them in a warm grasp. "As you must have realized, Isobel is very like your husband."

◆

*Love's a malady without a cure.*

John Dryden
Palamon and Arcite

"You mean—"

"Harry and your Hal are half-brothers," he said, his fingers gripping mine. "My brother Harry was a little wild at one time and apparently he and Emily Frazer—she reverted to her maiden name to come here—had an . . . alliance, before he met you."

"She was at the war," I said dully. "She was a nurse with Miss Nightingale."

"She assures me that she only nursed Harry for a short while, and that the affair was over long before," he put in quickly. "She met John Dunn later, married him and it was when they saw the notice of your father's death in the paper that they developed this preposterous idea of theirs."

"But I still don't know what they hoped to achieve. What good would Hal's death have done?"

"They hoped Harry would replace Hal here. Mrs. Frazer was continuously putting him forward, and once Hal was out of the way, John Dunn intended to make Harry's birth known, hoping that the child would be accepted in Hal's place."

I dropped my face into my hands. "How horrible."

"They will be gone in the morning. I've given them money and the assurance that they would not be prosecuted if they take passage to one of the colonies. Dunn was in Canada at one time and I believe they intend to return there. You have no need to see them again."

Silence fell between us, while we both gazed into the flickering fire until I felt called upon to speak.

"So. Everything is finished."

"Not quite." Sir Giles leaned over me, and taking my hands, drew me to my feet. "There is still a little unfinished business to which I must attend."

I made no effort to pretend I did not know what he meant, but stood still, gazing steadily up into his dark violet eyes, while my breath quickened and my heart beat like a drum against the lavender silk of my fancy dress.

"Our life will never be easy. We shall fight and quarrel—and make up. But I find I cannot live without you—and I believe you are not indifferent to me. You have no relative or guardian to whom I can pay my addresses, but I know that if I were to wake the sleeping gentleman in the room behind us, he would willingly give me his permission. Lucy dear—dear Lucy—will you marry me?"

"Yes," I said simply. "Yes—oh, yes," and went into his arms as though that was where I had always belonged. ◆

### A Cameo Legend

# under the Mistletoe

*In spite of Siguna's warning to beware the wrath of the Gods, Loki persisted in his devilish mischief*

By Leora M. Sies

Siguna was the beautiful daughter of one-eyed Woden, the all-powerful king of the gods in the northern ice mountains. Although she could have had her pick of anyone, Siguna loved the handsome Loki, the son of the evil giant Farbauti, who had sprung from a wicked demon race.

Loki's striking good looks and his charm so beguiled Woden that he adopted him and brought him up to live in many-halled Asgard, the kingdom of the gods. But, wherever Loki went, trouble followed.

"Your devilish nature will bring about your downfall," Siguna wailed. "Woden has been so generous to you—and you—you always cause trouble." She shook her head warningly. "Someday you will go too far and be severely punished."

"Never!" Loki laughed as he patted her cheek reassuringly. "I am too cunning. Even when I am found out for some mischief I have caused, I am always able to extricate myself from punishment by my wit and ready charm."

There was a roar on the rainbow bridge of Bifrost. When Siguna looked, she saw Woden's favorite son Balder smoting his brow and calling out fearful lamentations.

Balder was the god of sunlight and spring and gladness. He was the most beloved of the gods and it was not like him to be in such despair.

"What troubles you so, Great Balder?" Loki asked, his dark eyebrows arching up over extremely mischievous amber eyes.

"I am troubled by the terrible dreams I had last night," Balder said. "In one horrible nightmare after another my life was fatally imperiled."

"Surely such a powerful god as yourself cannot be worried about some foolish dreams?" Loki laughed as he poked his finger into the golden folds of Balder's silken kirtle.

"Indeed, I am. These were dreams of prophecy," Balder said. His brow was creased with worry.

Before Loki could reply with some cunning quip, Balder's mother, the High-Goddess Frigga, stepped forward. She placed her arms about her son to comfort him.

"Trouble yourself no longer, dear Balder, for I promise to exact an oath from all things everywhere that none of them will do you any harm," she told him. "You will be safe."

Balder was not reassured by his mother's words. He shook his head despondently, knowing that her efforts were futile.

"I am doomed," he cried in such a despairingly mournful tone that Loki laughed so hard the tears ran down his cheeks.

"The great god Balder is doomed," he called, mimicking Balder's tone perfectly as he rolled about the ground in uncontrolled merriment. "Oh, the mighty god is doomed. Then we're all doomed. I'm doomed. Siguna is doomed. Goodbye everyone!" he shrieked in laughter, pointing his finger at Balder as he continued to laugh hysterically at the seemingly absurd possibility.

Finally, Balder had to laugh, too. Yes, it all seemed a great joke. Nevertheless, Frigga was determined to keep her promise to her son. She roamed the earth exacting a promise from fire and water, from iron and all the other metals, from stones, trees, diseases, beasts, birds, poisons, and creeping things, that none would harm Balder.

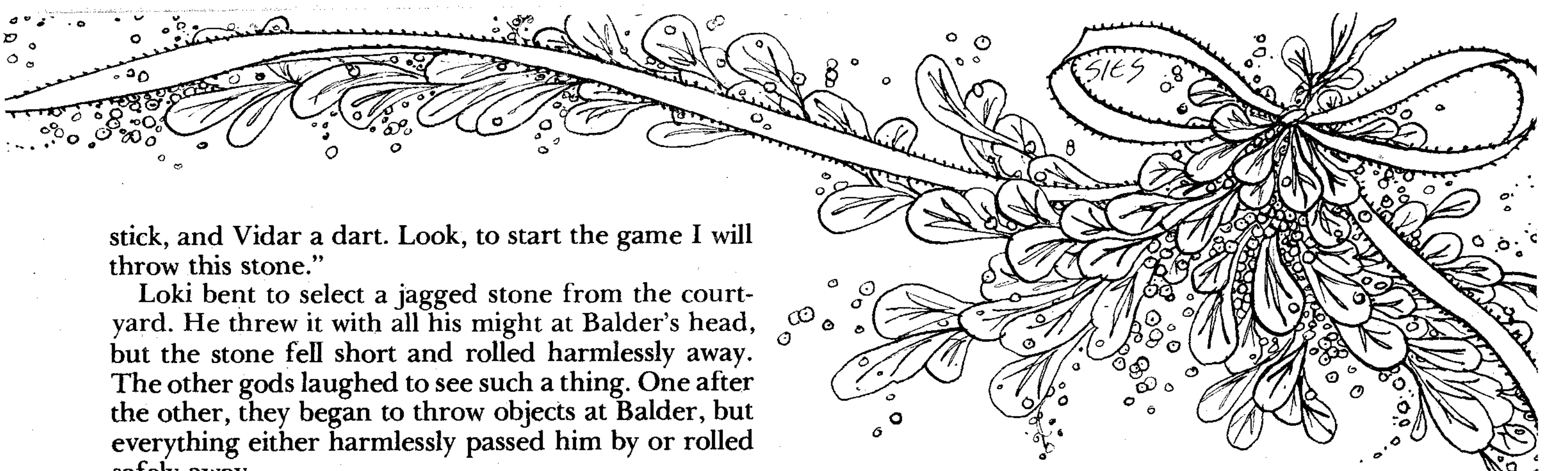
Stealthily Loki followed Frigga to see if she missed someone or something. She did not.

Then, as she was returning to Fensalir, her golden palace at Asgard, Frigga passed a growth of mistletoe sprouting on the eastern side of Valhalla. The plant was sacred to the gods and so beautiful and harmless-looking that the goddess did not think it necessary to exact an oath from it, and she continued right by.

Siguna suspected Loki was planning some mischief when she saw him following secretively after Frigga. She was so concerned about him that she, in turn, followed after him to see what he was up to. She saw him pause by the mistletoe and throw back his head, the laughter bubbling out of him, but, like Frigga, she never suspected that even cunning Loki could put the lovely mistletoe to an evil use.

She was wrong, however, for Loki broke off a piece of the mistletoe branch, and he cut its end into a menacingly sharp point. When he was finished, he hid the mistletoe dagger in his belt and went in search of the other gods.

"Frigga has exacted a promise from all things not to harm Balder," he told them in his merry tone. "Balder is safe. And to prove it, let us get up a game. Thor, throw your mighty hammer at Balder's head. Freyr, throw your magical sword. Tyr will throw a



stick, and Vidar a dart. Look, to start the game I will throw this stone."

Loki bent to select a jagged stone from the courtyard. He threw it with all his might at Balder's head, but the stone fell short and rolled harmlessly away. The other gods laughed to see such a thing. One after the other, they began to throw objects at Balder, but everything either harmlessly passed him by or rolled safely away.

While the gods enjoyed their new game, Loki crept up to Hoder, the blind god of winter. Taking the spear of mistletoe from his belt, Loki placed it in Hoder's hand.

"Join the game, Hoder. Here, I will help guide your hand," Loki said in a good-natured tone.

"I am blind. I cannot play such a game," Hoder replied with his icy voice.

"Of course you can play," Loki insisted. "Just because you are blind you should not be left out of the fun. I will direct your throw at Balder."

Siguna realized in that instant what was happening. She saw the mistletoe in Hoder's hand and she leapt forward to stop Loki, but it was too late.

With Loki's help, Hoder had thrown the mistletoe dagger. It pierced Balder's heart, and with a deafening cry that filled the heavens with his agony, the mighty Balder fell mortally wounded to the ground.

Loki tried to blame Hoder for the deed, but the gods knew he was responsible and they crowded menacingly around him. Then, Loki tried to place the blame on Frigga for failing to exact an oath from the mistletoe. When that did no good, Loki insisted he was innocent and that it was only the killing mistletoe who was to blame. He was very witty and at his most amusing as he attempted to sway the gods to forgive him, but Siguna knew he could not win this time.

One-eyed Woden was determined Loki would not escape. The death of his beloved son Balder was terrible, and Loki must be punished for perpetrating such a crime. Clad in his cloud-gray kirtle and in his hood as blue as the sky, Woden strode across the ice mountains to Loki's side.

"For this evil deed done to Balder you will be eternally punished," the king of the gods proclaimed in his thunderous voice. "Forevermore, you will be chained in a cavern deep in the earth. A serpent will be placed above your head so that its venom will fall continuously on that handsome face of yours, which so cunningly masks your evil nature. The venom will cause you excruciating pain."

Siguna cried bitter tears at Loki's unhappy fate. For all his faults, she loved him desperately.

Defying the wrath of the gods, she crept down into the dreadful cavern where Loki was bound. It was terrible for her to see how he suffered when the serpent's venom fell upon his cheek. Determined to help him, Siguna sat by his side holding a cup over his face to catch the poison before it could reach him.

The hideous serpent hissed threateningly at Siguna, and although she was almost paralyzed by fear, she loyally remained by Loki's side and continued to catch the poison in her golden cup. When Woden saw what Siguna was doing, his fury knew no bounds.

"So, you think you can thwart me in this manner, do you?" he thundered so fiercely that the two black ravens, who always sat upon his shoulders, flew away into the night. "Loki will still suffer, for your golden cup will soon fill to the brim with venom. When you go to empty it, the serpent's poison will fall on Loki's face once again."

"I do not want to go against your will, Father," Siguna cried in despair, "but I cannot help myself for I love Loki."

"If you are able to love such an evil creature, your fate must bind you to him. For your punishment you will remain forever more by his side. A wreath of mistletoe will be placed upon you head so whenever Loki looks up at you, he will see the implement that brought him down."

Siguna could ask for no more. Now, she and Loki would be together forever.

Wearing the wreath of mistletoe upon her golden hair, Siguna continued to sit beside her beloved. She cooed soft words of comfort to him, and continuously bent to kiss him. Her only reward was the grateful look in Loki's eyes.

Drop by drop the poisonous venom fell into her golden cup. Finally, the cup was full, and Siguna was forced to empty it. As she did so, the serpent's poison fell upon Loki, and he howled with such pain and writhed in such torment that the whole earth shook.

Quickly emptying the cup, Siguna returned to her post. She kissed Loki's brow again and again as she held her cup aloft to prevent the venom from falling on him.

Siguna remained so lovingly loyal to Loki that she was greatly praised by everyone who knew of her. Soon, the evil associated with the mistletoe was forgotten, and it was only remembered as Siguna's wreath, a symbol of eternal love.

At the winter solstice, our Christmas season, the sun is reborn and evil deeds are forgotten in the hope of a new beginning. It is the time of year to express love, and if you hold a piece of mistletoe over a loved one's head, he is sure to give you a kiss as sweet as those Siguna gave Loki.

# the Siegfried Idyll

*(Continued from page 25)*

rounded a corner to see her daughters dressed up in play costumes reciting a birthday poem. Backing off quickly, she cautiously peeped around the corner again.

Of course! The 25th of December was nearing, and in the Wagner household the date was extra special: not only was Christmas to be celebrated, but Cosima's birthday as well, for she had been born on that date in 1857.

Not wanting to spoil any surprises her daughters might have in store for her, Cosima backed away quickly and entered her rooms through a side hallway.

Christmas morning 1870 dawned crisp and bright. Cosima, fully relaxed after the previous evening's celebrations and dramatic exhibition by her children, slept soundly in her thick featherbed. Her mind was reliving the delightful songs and poems the girls had presented to her in honor of her birthday, when suddenly, a few bars of music gently drifted through the thick door of her room.

Her eyes opened gently as the music stopped, and she was about to close them when once again the gentle strain sounded.

For a third time, the caressing musical phrase was repeated and it suddenly flowered into a long, yearning melody vaguely resembling the music Richard had written for his opera, *Siegfried.* But this was not the bombastic, brass-laden music Richard had written to challenge the demands of the most powerful singers alive; it was soft, gentle, melodious music, filled with affection—no—it was filled with the deepest love.

But at seven-thirty in the morning at a lakeside house in the middle of the Swiss countryside?

Quickly Cosima rose from her bed. Wrapping herself in a rose-colored quilted silk robe, she swiftly walked to the heavy bedroom door and opened it, looking down the stairs from the top of the landing. Her eyes filled with tears at the sight below her.

There was Richard, at the foot of the stairs, baton in hand, directing a dozen musicians in a performance of a new piece of music, written for her, and written with all of the love and concern in his soul. The music swelled briefly, and a trumpet sounded a little fanfare, drawing Cosima's attention to the player.

Richter! So that was it! Hans nodded briefly, his face the same beet-red color it had been on the lakeshore several weeks before.

The music over, Richard raced up the staircase past the musicians. "You see, my beloved Cosima. My gift to you, the only gift I could scrape together from the bottom of my soul: a musical gift in return for the joys and pleasures and the son you have brought to my existence!"

Arturo Toscanini stood before Cosima, tears streaming down his face. In heavily Italian-accented German he began to speak.

"You know, Frau Wagner, of all of your husband's works, this work, the *Siegfried Idyll* is something I cannot conduct without the tears falling from my eyes." Cosima, now blind in 1930, was unable to see the maestro's tears, but she knew. "It must have been something very special, that Christmas morning sixty years ago. This music—it is unlike anything else your husband wrote in his entire career."

"Yes, Maestro, I know," Cosima replied. "I know, and—" She could not go on, for what she knew about this music and her life together with Richard Wagner filled her with emotion so overwhelming her voice became choked and stifled.

"*Capisco,* Frau Wagner," Toscanini said helpfully, "I understand. This music, this love, comes only once in a century. But to have been the recipient of such a gift . . . You are the most fortunate woman in the world." ◆

### *Editor's Note*

*Cosima Liszt, daughter of Franz Liszt and the Countess Marie d'Agoult, was born at Bellagio, Italy on Christmas Day, 1837. She was married to Hans von Bülow in Berlin on August 18, 1857. They were divorced in the fall of 1869.*

*Richard Wagner married Minna Planar on November 24, 1836 at Königsberg. They separated in August 1861.*

*Wagner and Cosima were married at Lucerne in 1870. Their son, Siegfried, was born at Tribschen, near Lucerne, on June 6, 1869.*

*After Richard died in 1883, Cosima became the guardian of his musical heritage for nearly fifty years, until she died in 1931 at Bayreuth, Germany, the site of the annual Wagner Festivals each August. For half a century, no one could speak against her husband in her presence, and her fidelity to her husband's legacy and work was legendary.*

*Arturo Toscanini, perhaps the greatest conductor of the twentieth century, conducted Wagner's music frequently at Bayreuth, without any fee. In 1929 he gave a special memorial concert with members of the Berlin Philharmonic in the garden of Villa Wahnfried, Wagner's last home, at Bayreuth, in the presence of his widow.*

*The final piece of music on the program was the* Siegfried Idyll *written by Richard Wagner as his gift to his wife in 1870.*

*Several recordings of the* Siegfried Idyll *are generally available for those who wish to hear this marvelous piece of music: Arturo Toscanini's version is recorded on RCA Victrola 1247 in monaural sound; in stereo, Bruno Walter's exquisite reading with the Columbia Symphony is recorded on Odyssey Y-30667.*

# parents' evening

*(Continued from page 29)*

what the other folks' problems are. No one's asked me if I'm feeling nervous—"

"Why—are you, Dad?" Susie asked, her eyes round.

"Well, I was till I started in on this very good sherry of yours. Is there any more where that came from, young man?"

"I remember your grandmother putting me through a veritable inquisition soon after your mother and I became engaged," Pete's father said dreamily, holding his glass out to his son for a refill. "It wasn't until I was a father myself that she told me your grandfather had put her up to it because he was too scared to do it himself. And she had reduced me to a palpitating jelly."

"Lets face it—it's one of the most terrifying—"

Susie took advantage of their absorption in the topic to slip away to the kitchen—taking care to leave the door open—to inspect the damage done to the casserole by overcooking. It did not seem too bad—a little dried-out, nothing worse. On impulse, she poured in a generous dose of cooking wine. Since the evening looked as though it might be happily bibulous, the food, she felt, ought to go along with the general mood. She was suddenly aware that Pete was standing just behind her.

"You know, I'm honestly beginning to feel a bit—unnecessary—out there," he whispered, a bewildered expression on his face. "They're really doing all right—they could very well get along without us."

"That's what I thought. Oh, Pete, how stupid I was to worry."

"Now I'm worried," he replied. "We've run out of sherry, and I'm beginning to wonder if we have enough wine. Is the food nearly ready?"

"It's been ready for at least half an hour. Relax—if we run dry we could always use up this cooking stuff. They'll be too far gone by then to notice. Don't forget they'll have to drive home. I'd better make the coffee extra strong." Peals of laughter rang out of the other room. "They really do seem to be hitting it off amazingly well. Do you know—your mother has the most perfectly beautiful hair."

"And yours has...". He paused, almost guiltily.

"Mine has what?"

"The second-best figure I know"—he phrased it gallantly—"especially when she's bending over a door handle."

Saying which, he took the owner of the very best figure he knew in his arms. The parents, he felt, could safely be left to play by themselves a little longer.

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# Where Have I Been Until Now?

*(Continued from page 32)*

midway through her week, and a tiny wave of protesting depression arose within her.

Of Kenneth she had thought only briefly, although she had received two telephone calls. There was a new, unprecedented anxiety in his suave voice, which boded well for their future. Except that suddenly the future seemed to have expanded into a new, exciting and quite different panorama.

She slipped into a terry-cloth bathrobe and hurried down to the pool, housed in a glass-domed building with elegant Italian tiling. It was almost always empty at this time of day, and Angela looked forward to her solitary, leisurely swim. Over the years she had forgotten the delicious pleasure of slipping through warm, sensuous water.

She dropped her robe and dived in, and immediately torpedoed Jefferson C. Browne, who was practicing his underwater prowess.

There was a great deal of thrashing, of flurried water and gasping sounds from Angela. Then she felt herself being slowly righted by strong, capable hands, and became aware that she was being held against the General's hard body.

Steel-blue, unflinching eyes looked into soft gray ones, and as if slipping into a time-warp, recalling his lost sweetheart, Jefferson C. Browne leaned forward and put his mouth on hers.

Angela (who was *still* Angela, despite her fine new feathers) kissed him back, knowingly and pleasurably.

He released her, and wordlessly they swam together, companionably, naturally. Neither ever alluded to the kiss, but there existed now between them an unexpressed bond. As they walked together through the dark, cool woods, or battled good-humoredly over the chessboard, each separately and privately recognized the special quality of their relationship. But by far the best moments were in the pool, where they swam together in what seemed like their own magic, exclusive world.

They probed occasionally and gently into each other's lives, and Angela glimpsed the secret loneliness in this strong, competent man. Jefferson C. Browne watched the sweet, mobile face, listened to the soft, warm voice, and wondered what sort of a moron Kenneth Jardine could be. He wasn't in the least mollified to learn that he would meet him at the farewell ball to be held on Saturday night.

At seven-thirty on Saturday evening, Angela was ready, and in just two minutes she would be face to face with Kenneth. She glanced at herself in the mirror and saw the gleaming, suntanned shoulders, the simple yet daring cream silk dress, and thought fleetingly of her choice for *last* Saturday, the demure lilac chiffon with its pretty, fluted cape.

She hesitated momentarily by the open wardrobe door and touched the dress softly in half-apology, but bowed to the undisputed fact that for tonight the cream silk was the only choice. It was as if she were another person, with the real Angela hidden within, observing, learning, finding herself.

There was no doubt which image Kenneth preferred. He was waiting in the lounge with the rest of the outside guests, and Angela saw the awed disbelief on his face as she walked over to him.

His eyes were transparent in their

admiration. He positively fawned upon her and within five minutes had invited Angela to his firm's annual dinner. It was the first time she had been so honored.

Angela smiled and sparkled, regaling him with witty anecdotes culled from her week's stay, but there was a curious apathy within her, like a child who has waited eagerly for some seemingly out-of-reach bauble only to find that with possession comes disillusionment.

She saw Kenneth's approval at the compliments paid her by fellow guests and staff, and his hand on her arm was warm and proprietary.

"You've been a hit," he said, allowing the satisfaction to show. "You've taken the place by storm."

Angela smiled and looked in vain for the General. He *wouldn't* have gone without saying good-bye? She discovered that the thought was too painful to contemplate. She suddenly felt loathe to re-enter the outside world, a world without Jefferson C. Browne. He would go back to his tycoon world and forget their hours of discussion and stalemate struggles on the chessboard.

She looked down into the red liquid depths of the wine she was drinking and wondered how quickly he would forget that day in the pool. She knew that she would never forget.

The dinner was delicious but Angela hardly touched it. Kenneth teased her. "You can stop dieting now, darling. They tell me you've been the perfect guest. There seems to be nothing you haven't excelled at."

Angela looked at him and suddenly she needed his answers, his support. "You approve of all this, don't you, Kenneth?" Her hands touched her hair, faltered at her revealing neckline. "*You* like the new me."

Kenneth checked his surprise and trod warily. "Isn't that the whole point of the exercise? Isn't that why you *came*?"

Angela nodded and patted his hand. "You're quite right. That *is* why I came. But if *this* is me, where have *I* been all these years?"

She got up and excused herself, bumping into Aimée Van Druyten in the doorway. Aimée was sparkling. "Angie, my dear. I want you to be the first to hear the news. First after Gregory, that is. I just telephoned him, and I hope he's as shocked as he sounds. Giovanni and I are going to be married."

She regarded Angela with a quizzical eye for a moment. "The General doesn't seem in a dancing mood, by the way. Unless it's water ballet."

Angela hugged her and then went out into the cold night air, feeling it play gently in her hair, cooling her warm shoulders.

She sped through the dark rhododendron-lined paths to the swimming pool.

Jefferson C. Browne had finished his swim and was emerging from the deep end, his trim, brown frame glistening with water. He put on a short robe and came slowly along the pool's edge toward her. His gaze was level and utterly belied the sudden turmoil within him.

"This is a strange time for a swim," Angela said.

"My last official activity," he said. "I have very happy memories of this place."

He looked down at her and observed the silky folds of the cream dress revealing the swell of her breasts. "I liked the dress you wore last Saturday," he said. "I liked everything about you last Saturday. Your hair was like a bird's wing, smooth and gleaming and just asking to be touched. You were like some fresh garden flower, and I can't imagine why you wanted to be different in any way."

The echoing silence was around them again, and Angela's voice was almost lost.

"Sometimes other people want us to be different. And we ourselves aren't sure. We never know ourselves sufficiently." Her face was solemn. "Do *you* know *yourself*?"

He wondered if this pool was indeed a place of enchantment, the workshop of spells and magical charms—because he was in direct danger of asking this girl to come back to the States with him, as his wife. His *wife*. A proposal based on an association of six short days. He called on his resources of a lifetime of logic and said coldly, "No doubt your friend is wondering where you are. Perhaps you should go."

Angela felt the tears of disappointment prick at her eyes. She had been so *sure* that he would know himself, would know what he wanted, what he had to do. Had she not seen his face just a minute ago? Was she mistaken?

In her despair, she turned fiercely, and the combination of the force of her movement and the wet, slippery smoothness of the tiling caused her to lose her balance, teeter precariously on the edge before falling facedown into the aquamarine depths.

Jefferson C. Browne felt the joyous laughter begin deep within him. He dived with eager thankfulness into the pool, feeling for her, straightening her, holding her to him.

Angela inelegantly spat out fountains of water and hammered furious fists against the rock-hard chest.

Jefferson C. Browne forced her to look at him and touched her hair, now plastered darkly around her face. "It's smoother already."

Then he kissed her. He took his time because he knew it was the most solemn commitment of his life. Because he *did* know himself and knew that there was only one possible direction for him.

Angela was oblivious to her ruined dress, to Kenneth, to *anything* except that she was reliving the magic of the first kiss. Only this time it was even more special, because there was a sense of permanence about it, a feeling of coming home.

There were things to be done and there was Kenneth to be told, but for this moment there could well have been only herself and General Jefferson C. Browne in the whole, wide world.

And so she gave him her absolute and undivided attention.

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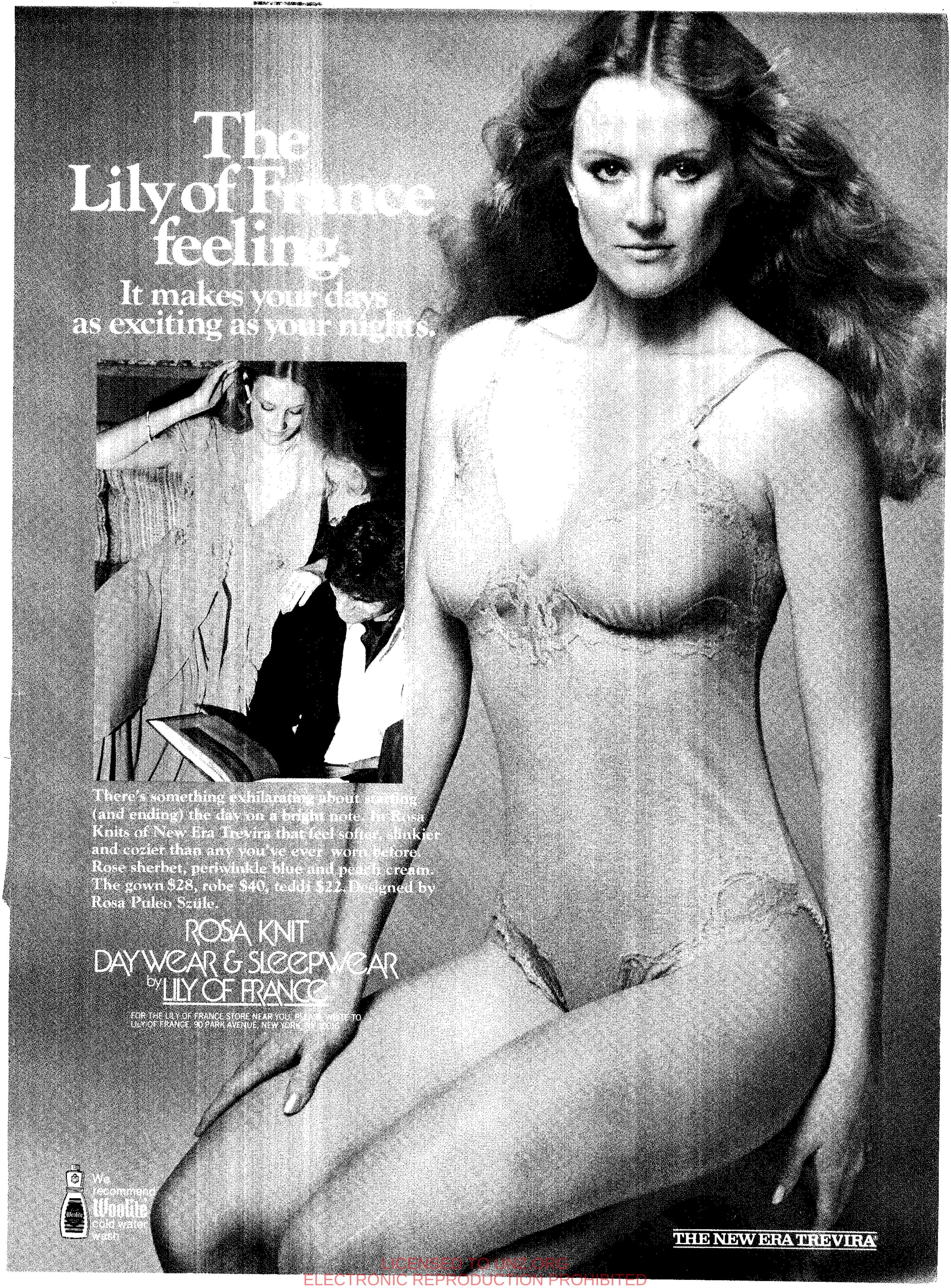

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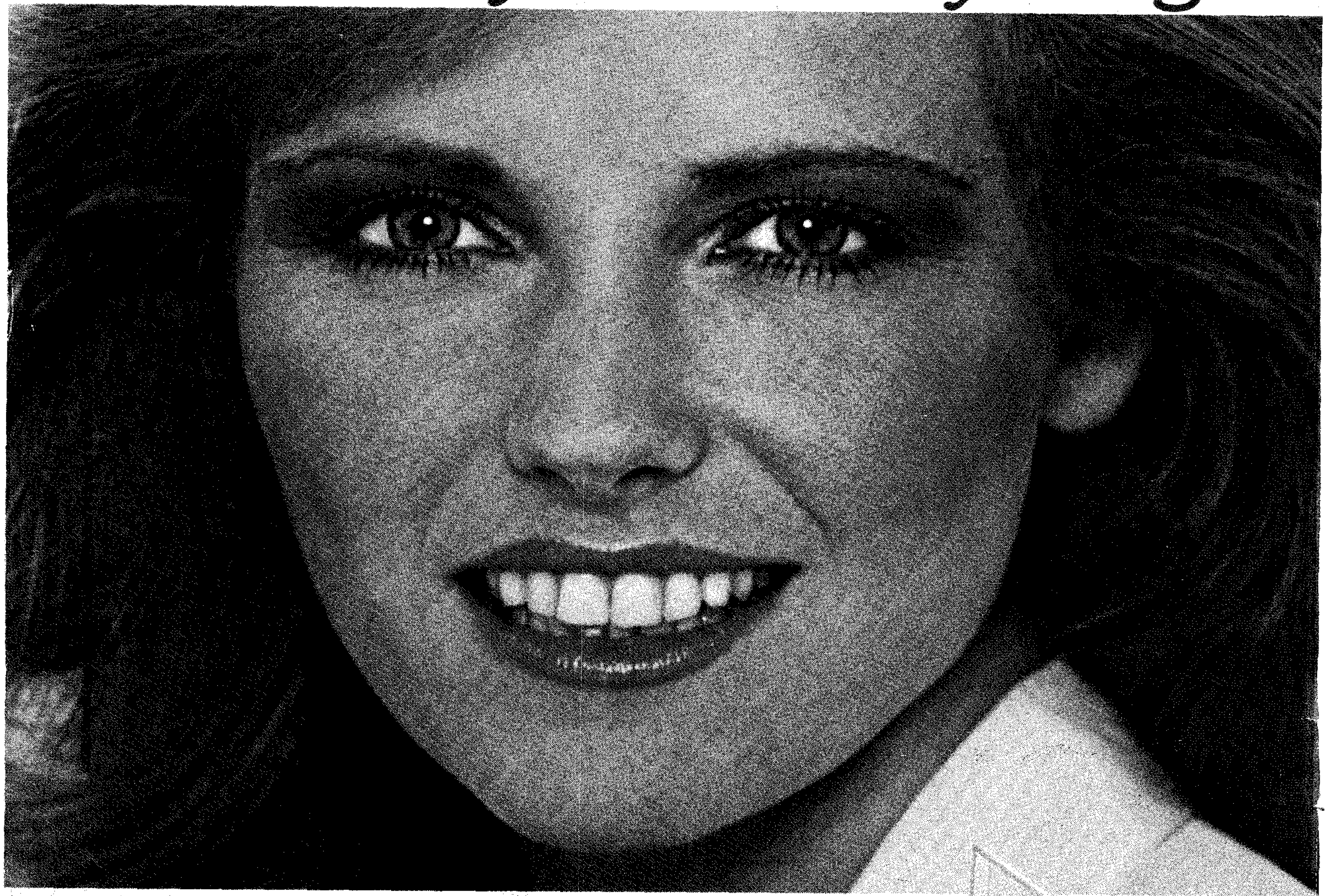

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